

Ordained by Nature (Kimmel, chapter 2)

In the 19th Century science, rather than religion, became the dominant reason why men and women are different and why “the laws of nature” discredited efforts to challenge gender inequality.

Today’s biological arguments draw from three areas of research:

Evolutionary psychology: Differences between men and women, e.g., mate selection, are the result of evolutionary development.

Critique: Evolutionary psychologists observe what is normative, then create “just-so” story to explain it. Alternative stories can be told to explain almost any purported behaviors.

Brain research: Since the 18th century scientists have been trying to locate gender differences in the brain, e.g., brain size, hemisphere differences and connections, use of different areas.

Critique: Like evolutionary psychology, brain research finds explanations for already believed differences between men and women. However, “there seems to be little consistent evidence for significant brain differences between women and men.”

Hormones: Some researcher have attempted to connect differences and even patriarchy to hormonal differences.

Critique: Kimmel focuses on the link between testosterone and aggression and finds mixed results. Testosterone may have a “permissive effect” on aggression, but it is also caused by aggression and dominance.

Kimmel is also skeptical of research on the “gay gene,” hetero/homosexual brain differences, and hormonal explanations for homosexuality.

“If male domination is natural, based on biological imperatives, why, asks sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, must it be coercive, held in place by laws, traditions, customs, and the constant threat of violence for any woman who dares step out of line? Why would women want to enter male spheres such as colleges and universities, politics and the labor force, and the military, for which they are clearly biologically ill-suited?” (p. 49)

Ordained by Nature, continued

Kimmel points out several complications related to politics and biological explanations of gender. While some conservatives think biological explanations promote traditional gender roles, some feminists think women are naturally better than men in some respects.

Some gays & lesbians support biological explanations of sexual orientation because they think it will lead to greater acceptance. Some conservatives who support biological explanations of sex differences, reject biological explanations of sexual orientation.

Kimmel believes gay & lesbians are gender conformists, and “gender, *not sexual orientation*, is the organizing principle of sexual behavior.”

Further thoughts about biology & gender development

Biology and culture interact. Everything we do draws upon our biological potential and abilities. However, our actions interact with our environment, and our actions and our environment change our biology.

Examples of interactions:

- Negative attitudes about menstruation may influence women’s experience of PMS symptoms (and studies of it).
- Individuals with chromosomal abnormalities may become “more masculine” or “more feminine” because their parents socialize them differently to compensate for the abnormalities.
- Gender socialization may produce different skills in men and women (e.g., expression of emotion, verbal vs. spatial skills) that are then reflected in brain organization.
- Interest in biological differences between men and women may rise during times when social differences appear to be eroding.