

The Original Sexist Sin: A Reply to Neil Levy

Edgar Dahl, PhD

At the risk of not being quite fair, let me start with an admittedly heart-wrenching story told by a mother of three boys:

“I dreamed of a daughter since I was 9 years old. I even started keeping a journal for ‘her’ when I was 10. Somehow it never occurred to me that I would ever have a son. But as destiny had it, my first three children were all boys. Although I love them to pieces, I still longed for a daughter. When I got pregnant with my fourth child I was convinced it was going to be ‘my baby girl.’ I ‘felt’ it in my bones. And then . . . the ultrasound. I saw it before I was told. I was having yet another boy! I didn’t want my husband to see my disappointment and I fought back my tears. I waited for him to leave the room so it was just me and my mom. I cried. And I cried. I said, ‘Mom, I am heartbroken.’ She held me as I knew she understood. We are so close and I just wanted a little girl to share that with. I cried all day. A bit the next day. A little less the third day. I started to come to terms with having another boy by fantasizing about how soon I could get started on having my girl.

Two months after my fourth son was born, he got sick. He started to vomit and have diarrhea. Since he didn’t get better over the next two weeks, we took him to the children’s hospital. They ran a standard blood panel on my little guy and within 15 minutes we were told he had infant leukemia. The news was grave. My husband and I wept. We held each other all night. I felt I was being punished for wishing he was a girl. I still feel guilty.”

In the eyes of Neil Levy she is indeed guilty—not of causing her son’s cancer, of course, but of being “sexist.” According to him, “it is sexist to have expectations of children because of their gender alone.”

Is it sexist for women to expect a “special closeness” or a “unique bond” with a daughter? The answer entirely depends on what is meant by being “sexist.” Traditionally, sexism was taken to mean discrimination based on sex. According to this definition, it is sexist to deprive citizens of their basic human or civil rights simply because they are members of a particular sex; to deny women the right to vote, bar them



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from public office, or to preclude them from participating equally with men in the public arena are classic examples of sexism.

Nowadays sexism is often taken to mean everything that can be vaguely construed as “offensive to women”—be it a demeaning remark or a dirty joke. Even scientists, especially sociobiologists, have been accused of being sexist for speculating about the evolutionary origins of behavioral sex differences. Although space limits prevent me from arguing for it, I trust that most readers would agree that the traditional definition is too narrow and the modern definition is too wide to capture the crucial idea of wrongful discrimination against women.

Let us try a third definition. Feminist philosopher, Laura Purdy, has suggested defining sexism as “the failure to give equal weight to women’s interests.” Rural India probably provides the best example of this kind of sexism. Given that boys are seen as more valuable than girls, sons often receive more attention, food and health care. When a son gets sick, the parents call a doctor, when a daughter gets sick, they simply say a prayer.

Now, can parents seeking sex selection to ensure they are having children of both sexes be accused of this kind of sexism? Most certainly not! As far as we know, they love their children equally, they care for them equally and they consider their interests equally.

I am sure that Neil Levy and those who share his view will not be impressed by my response. They will argue that parents using sex selection are “sexist” in believing that girls and boys are different and that they are “sexist” in believing that raising a daughter is different from raising a son. They will insist that holding these beliefs is “the original sexist sin.”

Whether girls and boys are indeed different, however, is not an ethical, but an empirical question. It cannot be settled by some philosophical definition, but only by scientific evidence. Hence, the question we really have to address is, “Are parents justified or unjustified in believing that girls and boys are different?”

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Psychologists have been systematically studying sex differences for more than 100 years now. To varying degrees, their studies have confirmed that girls and boys do indeed have different interests, prefer to engage in different activities and show different social behavior. For example, girls tend to react with greater empathy to the distress of others. They are more likely to inquire about the well-being of others and to comfort them. They are more willing to accept another's viewpoint, are less competitive and work harder to minimize inequalities and conflict.

Given that there are sex differences, parents are anything but irrational, let alone sexist, in expecting to have different parenting experiences. Raising a girl will most likely turn out to be different from raising a son.

No doubt, some will call the psychological research into question and denounce their findings as "genetic determinism." However, this objection ignores a crucial point. After

all, it does not matter whether the existing sex differences between girls and boys result from "nature" or from "nurture." So long as girls and boys turn out to be different, we are perfectly justified in expecting to have different parenting experiences.

Some may concede that having girls as well as boys may provide us with distinct parenting experiences, but still insist that sex selection ought to be outlawed. They may say that a man's dream of leading a daughter down the aisle or a woman's hope to hold a daughter's hand in the delivery room are simply too weak a justification to permit parents to choose the sex of their children. However, this argument ignores our presumption in favor of liberty and obscures the fact that the burden of proof is always on those who wish to restrict the freedom of others. It is not the parents who have to justify themselves for wanting a daughter, but the state for not allowing them to have one.

| *Life only demands from you the strength you possess.
Only one feat is possible—not to have run away.*

—Dag Hammarskjöld