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Doing it for Themselves

James Geary

Parallel parking, fly-fishing, locating obscure addresses while driving (without asking directions), making and managing money. What do all these things have in common? They are all supposed to be abilities granted primarily to the male of the species. The Rhodes Project's research suggests that female Rhodes Scholars are managing quite well for themselves in many areas previously thought to be male preserves. In the process, they are bucking some — and confirming other — basic tenets of evolutionary biology.

One of the premises of evolutionary biology is that the genetic and environmental pressures faced by our distant ancestors still influence our behavior today. Evolution has brought about crucial physiological differences between males and females that influence their interests, their ambitions and even their eventual career choices. Many of these differences first emerge during puberty, when surging hormones begin transforming girls and boys into women and men. "As estrogen floods the female brain, females start to focus intensely on their emotions ... At the same time, as testosterone takes over the male brain, boys grow less communicative," writes Louann Brizendine in *The Female Brain*.¹ "At the point when boys and girls start deciding the trajectories of their careers, girls start to lose interest in pursuits that require more solitary work and fewer interactions with others, while boys can easily retreat alone to their rooms for hours of computer time."² In other words, the effect of estrogen on female brains makes girls, on average, more interested in fields involving people (medicine) or living things (biology); the effect of testosterone on male brains makes boys, on average, more interested in fields involving abstractions (mathematics, economics) or non-living things (engineering).

As these hormones wash over male and female brains, they leave important changes in their wake. Brizendine, a neuropsychiatrist and founder of the Women's and Teen Girls' Mood and Hormone Clinic in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, notes that male brains are larger than female ones by about nine percent. But women

¹ Louise Brizendine, *The Female Brain* (London: Bantam, 2007), p. 30.

² Brizendine, p. 31.

and men have the same number of brain cells, or neurons – and when it comes to brains, it is not just size that matters but the number of and connections among neurons. Women have eleven percent more neurons than men in the brain regions responsible for language and hearing, while the hippocampus – the principal hub for emotion and memory – is larger in women than in men. Perhaps this helps explain why women are quicker than men at picking up emotional cues in others, and why they tend to talk more. Women use about 20,000 words a day; men use about 7,000, most of them monosyllabic. Men have larger brain areas devoted to sex drive and aggression. Well, no surprise there.

Does all this mean that women can never become financiers or physicists? Not at all. Brizendine cites a German study in which men and women were asked to mentally rotate abstract three-dimensional shapes while under a brain scanner. Visual-spatial ability is often correlated with proficiency in mathematics. Men and women performed equally well on the task, but they used different brain pathways to do it. What these gender differences mean is that, on average, more men than women tend to be attracted to careers in economics or physics, an observation easily verified by glancing at any trading floor or laboratory. Gender discrimination and cultural stereotyping undoubtedly also play a role. Nevertheless, the biological facts remain.

One area where these differences manifest themselves is money. In general, women tend to feel less confident than men about their financial acumen, a feeling that can lead some to cede financial control to their spouses. A Merrill Lynch study found that 47 percent of women surveyed said they were not knowledgeable about investing; 30 percent of men said the same about themselves, according to the *Money* magazine article “Men, Women ... and Money.”³ In 2004, *Redbook* and *SmartMoney* magazines asked couples which partner had better financial judgment; 68 percent of men said they did, versus 59 percent of women, according to *The Truth about Women, Men and Money*.⁴

The Rhodes Project data indicates that female Rhodes Scholars are a lot more confident about money than their peers. When asked who is responsible for managing the family finances, just 19 percent named their partner. Some 34 percent named themselves, while 47 percent said they shared that responsibility equally. That means upwards of 80 percent of female Rhodes

³ Pat Regnier & Amanda Gengler, “Men, Women ... and Money.” *CNNMoney.com*. 14 March 2006. 10 February 2007. <http://money.cnn.com/2006/03/10/pf/marriagemain_moneymag_0604/index.htm>.

⁴ Valencia Konrad, “The Truth about Women, Men and Money.” *Redbook*. 10 February 2007 <<http://redbook.ivillage.com/sex/0,qbx9,00.html>>.

Scholars have a major say in their family's finances. That is significantly more than the 60 percent of affluent women who said they shared financial decision-making with their spouse in a 2005 survey by financial services group PNC Advisors. It makes sense that female Rhodes Scholars are so involved in money matters, since so many of them are also bringing home the bacon. When asked who supports their partnership financially, 25 percent cited their partner. About 24 percent cited themselves, and 51 percent said both partners jointly provided financial support.

Combining family and career is still a struggle, even for Rhodes Scholars. "While female brain wiring has not changed much in a million years," Brizendine writes in *The Female Brain*, "the modern challenges of the different phases of women's lives are remarkably different from those of our foremothers."⁵ There has, however, been some movement on the home front. When asked how household tasks are divided, 45 percent of Rhodes women said they did most or more than their partner; 51 percent said the tasks were equally divided or their partner did most or more. Childcare still falls mostly to the women, though. When asked who was the primary caretaker of their children, 46 percent of female Rhodes Scholars said they were. Another 45 percent said childcare was performed jointly, but just eight percent said their partner was the primary career.

Almost 62 percent of respondents said that striking a balance between work and family was among the most difficult life decisions they had ever faced. Some 81 percent said they had limited or turned down a career opportunity because of their children. When asked if their partner had limited or turned down any career opportunities because of their children, just 43 percent said "yes." Many female Rhodes Scholars clearly feel their relationships suffer because of their careers. When asked if they spent as much time with their partner as they would like, 48 percent said "yes." When asked the same question about their children, 52 percent said they spent as much time with them as they would like.

Because of their traditional role as primary carers, women face added challenges when it comes to solving the work-life equation. First of all, they start off at a disadvantage. According to MsMoney.com, women on average make 25 percent less than men and take eleven years out of the workforce to care for their families. Ann Crittenden,⁶ author of *The Price of Motherhood*, estimates that college-educated women with one child lose about \$1 million in earnings over

⁵ Brizendine, p. 210.

⁶ See <<http://www.anncrittenden.com/about.htm>>.

their working lives when they downshift or stop working altogether to raise children. Male brain wiring hasn't changed much in a million years, either, but the different phases of men's lives are remarkably similar to those of their forefathers. Aggressive, risk-taking males still tend to be more successful in career terms; they are less affected by child-rearing responsibilities, and they strive more often than women for the markers of financial success.

The responses to power and career-related questions support this gender difference too. Seventy-four percent of female Rhodes Scholars said "yes" when asked if both they and their partners were career-oriented. But when asked what figured most prominently in their definitions of success, the top three answers were "being inwardly satisfied," "having a fulfilling life-partnership," and "being respected as a leader in your profession." Some 77 percent said "yes" when asked if these definitions were influenced by their gender, and 64 percent said "no" when asked if a man in their position would have a similar view. When asked if women like themselves were less likely than men to be interested in pursuing traditional positions of power, 77 percent said "yes."

Female Rhodes Scholars have clearly taken on — and taken over — areas of financial management that were previously considered predominantly male terrain. They are just as career-oriented as men, but their definitions of career success have much more to do with emotions and relationships than with dollars and cents. The women's movement may still have a lot to accomplish (89 percent of Scholars said so), but women Rhodes Scholars are being successful in terms that evolutionary biology and modern research show women value. In that sense, these women have already gotten it right.