



HOW WOULD YOUR LIFE BE DIFFERENT

by Carol Tavris, with Dr. Alice I. Baumgartner

In essence it was a comparison between the lives of men and women that launched the movement for women's rights. As women realized that their lives would be not only *different* but also *better*—in status, income, advantages, freedom—if they were men, they began seeking ways to eradicate the inequities between the sexes. Anyone who has lived through the last decade knows what a bumpy ride it has been: a little progress here, a little relapse there, but over-all, a steady improvement.

Or has there been? The clearest measure of progress may be found not in the generation that struggles for change but in the generation that should be the beneficiary of change—the children of the pioneers. For ten years, public-school teachers and administrators have been trying to eliminate sex bias in the counseling they provide to children, in the books that children read, in the lessons they teach (by example as well as in content). To measure the effect of this effort, Dr. Alice I. Baumgartner and her colleagues at the Institute for Equality in Education, at the University of Colorado, came up with a startlingly simple method. They surveyed nearly 2,000 children throughout the state of Colorado: children in grades three through 12, from large metropolitan areas and from small rural communities. They simply asked one question: *If you woke up tomorrow and discovered that you were a (boy/girl), how would your life be different?*

The answers were sad and shocking, for they show how little has in fact changed in children's attitudes in the recent years of social upheaval. Dr. Baumgartner did not find that boys and girls think there are benefits and disadvantages to being either sex. What she found was a fundamental consensus: *Boys would be better off.*

The elementary-school boys, for example, often titled their answers with little phrases such as "The Disaster," or "The Fatal Dream," or "Doomsday." Then they described how awful their lives would be if they were female: "I wouldn't like having a little pink dress or anything about a girl. It wouldn't be fun" (fourth-grade boy). "If I

were a girl, I'd be stupid and weak as a string" (sixth-grade boy). "If I woke up and I was a girl, I would hope it was a bad dream and go back to sleep" (sixth-grade boy). "If I were a girl, everybody would be better than me, because boys are better than girls" (third-grade boy). And this one, succinctly: "If I were a girl, I'd kill myself."

But the girls wrote repeatedly of how much better off they would be as boys. "If I were a boy, I would be treated better. I would get paid more and be able to do more things" (fourth-grade girl). "I could do stuff better than I do now" (third-grade girl). "People would take my decisions and beliefs more seriously" (11th-grade girl). "If I were a boy, my whole life would be easier" (sixth-grade girl). And this poignant response from a third-grade girl: "If I were a boy, my daddy might have loved me."

To probe the children's answers more carefully, Dr. Baumgartner compared their remarks in four categories: matters of appearance; how their activities would change; how they would be expected to behave; and how others would treat them.

APPEARANCE

"I couldn't be a slob any more—I'd have to smell pretty."

Boys and girls alike realize that girls, but not boys, are judged by their looks and therefore must pay a lot of attention to their appearance. "If I was a girl," said one boy, "I'd have to curl my hair and put on makeup." One boy said with alarm: "I'd have to shave my whole body!" The girls, on the other

A shocking new study shows: Despite feminism, both sexes still think boys have it better

hand, said that not having to attend to these matters was a definite advantage to being male: "I wouldn't have to be neat" (fourth-grade girl). "I wouldn't have to worry how I look" (sixth-grade girl). Noting the amount of time and energy that "proper" dress and makeup require, a tenth-grade girl said, "If I woke up and discovered I was a boy, I would go back to bed, since it would not take very long to get ready for school."

The boys' comments, however, show that being a girl is not just a matter of cleanliness and neatness; what really matters is *being attractive*. "The boys frequently said that if they had to be a female, they would want to be 'gorgeous' or look like a particular movie star," says Dr. Baumgartner, "but none of the girls made any reference to wanting to be handsome if they were male." As early as the third grade, boys are aware of the hazards faced by women who are "gorgeous": "If I were gorgeous, I would be jeered at and hear plenty of comments," said one little boy. ("Unattractive women are jeered at too," Dr. Baumgartner observes. "It's just that they hear different kinds of comments.") By high school, when so many girls worry about being "gorgeous" to boys, the boys see the matter differently. "If I were a girl, I would use

IF YOU'D BEEN BORN A BOY?



a lot of makeup and look good and beautiful to everyone," wrote one teen-aged boy, "knowing that few people would care for my personality."

ACTIVITIES

"I would have to cook, be a mother and yucky stuff like that."

Is women's work — valued and valuable as men's work? Don't you believe it, said these children. "Not one girl expressed a negative reaction to male activities," says Dr. Baumgartner, "but most of the boys had a critical or hostile reaction to female activities—no matter whether those activities involved school, play, home chores, marriage or eventual choice of occupation. Their general view is summed up in the words of a boy who said 'Girls can't do anything that's fun' and the depressing words of a girl who said her expectation as a female was 'to be nothing.'"

Girls continually pointed out that they would have more or different career choices if they were male: "I could run for Presi-

dent"; "I want to be a nurse, but if I were a boy, I'd want to be an architect"; "I would consider work in math or science"; "if I were a boy, I could do more things"; "if I was a boy, I'd drop my typing class and start taking really hard classes, since my dad would let me go to college and he won't now." The boys felt they would *lose* choices if they were female: "I wouldn't be able to keep my job as a carpenter"; "I couldn't be a mechanic." One adamant young man, though, said he would "refuse to work as a secretary or something stupid like that."

When (he boys even considered the possibility that as females they could marry *and* work outside the home (for most boys, these were mutually exclusive categories), the jobs they listed most often were secretary and nurse. Other possible "female" occupations included cocktail waitress, social worker, airline stewardess, interior decorator, receptionist, model, beauty queen—and prostitute. "Boys still see women's work as serving others and providing support," says Dr. Baumgartner, "instead of being in charge."

To the girls, the thought of being male liberated their imagination. The career they mentioned most often as a possible choice if they were male was—ready?—*professional*

athlete. This was followed by a much longer list of possibilities than the boys see for girls: mechanic, construction worker, pilot, engineer, race-car driver, forest ranger, dentist, architect, stunt man, coal miner, geologist, farmer, sports commentator, draftsman, banker, and so on.

But there is a glimmer of good news. Four occupations that were once nearly all male are now (the children say) open to both sexes: truck driver, computer programmer, doctor and lawyer.

BEHAVIOR

"If I were a girl, I'd have to be ladylike and trampish."

Boys and girls learn early that girls may express their feelings but boys will be "sissies" if they do; boys are more belligerent than girls; and girls are weaker and more passive than boys, or at least are allowed to behave as if they were.

Many of the boys said that being female would restrain their active impulses: "I

anything else." And the girls likewise were aware of their preferential treatment: "If I were a boy, I'd be treated unfairly, with less respect"; "I'd get away with a lot less"; "I would more than likely get yelled at more" were some of their answers.

"The children are right," says Dr. Baumgartner, "because research tells us that teachers reprimand boys three or four times more often than they reprimand girls. The classroom is one of the few places where male rambunctiousness is punished. But it isn't just boys who pay the price of not conforming. The quiet behavior of girls may be appreciated more by the teacher—but it also means the girls are more often ignored. The boys get reprimands—but also more praise and attention." She reports that in this study, one of the math teachers insisted that there were more boys than girls in his advanced-math class. When he checked his grade book, he found out that he was wrong—the opposite was true. He'd simply been overlooking the girls.

What do these findings mean? Some child-development experts would say that there's nothing to get upset about, that children's prejudice against the female sex is just a phase during which they come to terms

Remember the power of example.

Everyone knows that children learn from what they see more than from what you tell them. Obviously they are seeing enough women doctors and lawyers now—species once as rare as the snail darter—to realize that these jobs have opened up to women. What example—in satisfaction, self-respect, activities—are you setting for your children?

Remember the important role of fathers.

"So many girls miss their fathers' company," says Dr. Baumgartner. They long to go on camping trips and sports outings and to share activities with them. Men should realize they play an important role not only in teaching their daughters to be traditionally "feminine" but also in generating their daughters' interests and ambitions.

Educate your sons about stereotypes, not only your daughters.

"My impression," says Dr. Baumgartner, "is that we're forever making suggestions about how to 'fix' females, and women are forever worrying about how to 'fix' themselves, when it's clear to me that it's males who are more of a problem. The solution to stereotyping is not just for women to do more

with the gender they are. Dr. Lawrence Kohlberg, of the School of Education at Harvard University, argues that all children go through a period of rigid stereotypic thinking while their mental faculties develop. At this stage Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman on the United States Supreme Court, couldn't convince a four-year-old that women can be judges. (I remember my cousin Claire's efforts to resolve category conflict when she was four and had just encountered her first female physician. "Guess what, guess what!" she exclaimed to her amused grandmother. "The nurse was a doctor!")

This argument is appropriate for very young children, but it does not explain why prejudice flows primarily in one direction—from boys to girls—and why girls disparage female activities as much as boys do. Nor does it explain why stereotypic thinking about the sexes *lasts*—why, for instance, as boys grow older (and presumably more self-assured about being male) they find less and less to admire in women.

The youngest elementary-school boys occasionally mentioned a few benefits of being female. "No one would make fun of me because I'm afraid of frogs," said a third grader, and a classmate confessed that he "could ride girls' bikes without being laughed at."

things. Women's work is devalued precisely because women do it; therefore we ought to be suggesting that males start doing a few 'female' things to balance the scales."

Finally, be alert and concerned—and keep your sense of humor and perspective.

Parents are only one of a thousand influences on children, and you can take neither all the blame nor all the responsibility for what your children think and do. Children are "raised" by their schools, times and friends, not just by parents. So if your house contains a five-year-old male chauvinist and a six-year-old incipient geisha, take heart. This does not necessarily mean that they will grow up to be Dagwood and Blondie. They have many years and influences ahead of them. The lessons that children learn in childhood are important for the kind of *childhood* they have, but they don't predict much about what they will become as *adults*. (Think of all the generations of women who grew up thinking that girls "can't" become doctors and lawyers—and who nevertheless entered medical and law schools in record numbers.)

A friend of mine told me that when she was a child she was the despair of her mother, a biochemist, because she kept insisting that "girls can't be scientists" and demanded frilly, impractical dresses. Today she is a physician—having similar debates with her two daughters.

—C.T.

But once out of grade school, none of the boys envied anything about womanhood, although most of the girls envied much about manhood. "It's-a-normal-stage" theories of cognitive development do not provide a satisfactory explanation for this. "The pattern suggests," says Dr. Baumgartner, "that we are talking not about expected emotional development but about differences in status—differences in the basic value of being male or female."

Others might say that there is nothing to be concerned about in Dr. Baumgartner's study because healthy sex-role development depends on each sex's adjusting eventually to what is expected of it and overcoming its envy of the other. Further, this argument goes, there is nothing wrong with sex stereotyping itself—so what if boys do learn to be mechanics and professional athletes and girls learn to be secretaries and housewives? The answer is that sex stereotyping takes a physical and psychological toll not only on children but also on adults, particularly in the physical health of men and in the financial and emotional health of women. (That is, in adulthood men have higher rates than women of heart disease and stress-related illnesses, whereas women have higher rates of depression and other psychological ills;

and sex stereotyping by job means that women earn on the average only 59 per cent of what men do.) When the belief that males are "better" is instilled in very young girls, it can have only an unhappy effect on female self-respect and self-confidence.

Sex stereotyping may have made practical sense in simpler times, but it is a psychological handicap for both sexes in the complicated 1980s—when both sexes need to know how to work, do the laundry, cook a meal, diaper a baby and balance a checkbook. What's come out of the mouths of Dr. Baumgartner's babes tells us that, baby, men and women have a long way yet to go.

THE END

Carol Tavris, a social psychologist and writer, is author of "Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion" (Simon and Schuster) and co-author of "The Longest War—Sex Differences in Perspective" (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) and "The Redbook Report on Female Sexuality" (Delacorte Press). Dr. Alice I. Baumgartner, formerly co-ordinator for the Institute for Equality in Education, in Denver, and Assistant Professor of Management at Colorado Women's College, is now devoting her time to extending this study to a nationwide sampling of children.

would have to be nicer"; "I'd have to be polite"; "I'd have to be kind, cute and have nice handwriting"; "I'd be quieter, more reserved, and wait for others to talk to me first"; "Instead of wrestling with my friends, I'd be sitting around gossiping." "I," said one weebegone boy, "would have to hate snakes."

Indeed, when boys imagine themselves as girls their language is filled with words of deprivation—what they would no longer be able to do: "I couldn't climb trees or jump the creek"; "I couldn't throw spitballs"; "I couldn't have a pocketknife"; "I would not help my dad wash the car or gas up the car"; "I couldn't play football or basketball." But when girls imagine themselves as boys, their language is filled with images of what they would gain: "I could go hunting and fishing with my dad"; "I could run for President"; "I wouldn't have to baby-sit"; "I'd be noisier and more active." And: "Life on the home front would be a lot easier. I know that for a fact, since I've got a brother."

Many girls realized that one disadvantage of maleness is stoicism: "If I were a boy, I would have to stay calm and cool whenever something happened"; "I would not be allowed to express my true feelings." The girls often felt that as boys they would have to be "rowdy," "smart-alecky," "macho," and "show off more"—though a couple of them saw male aggressiveness as an alternative to female pacifism. "I'd kill my art teacher," said one girl, "instead of arguing with him as I do now."

TREATMENT BY OTHERS

"My dad would respect me more if I were a boy."

Over and over, girls reported that if they were boys, they would be treated better than they are as girls: "I might be shown that

someone cares how I do in school"; "I'd get called on to answer more questions"; "I'd be trusted more when driving." (Interesting, that one, since teen-aged girls are more trustworthy drivers than teen-aged boys.) "My grandparents would treat me extra special"; "My father would be closer because I'd be the son he always wanted" (a sad and pervasive refrain); "I could play football without being laughed at by others."

Even the youngest boys and girls are aware of another disadvantage to being female: the prevalence of violence against women. Girls frequently mentioned that if they were boys, they would not have to worry about being raped or beaten up, and the boys feared for their safety if they became girls: "[If I were a girl], I'd have to know how to handle drunk guys and rapists" (eighth-grade boy). "I would have to be around other girls for safety" (sixth-grade boy). "I would always carry a gun for protection," said a fourth grader.

But there was one situation in which both sexes think girls are better off: that of the classroom. The rare benefits boys could imagine about being female had to do with better treatment in school: "If I was a girl, the teacher would favor me"; "I'd be treated like a normal human being, not an animal or

WHAT'S A MOTHER TO DO?

For parents who want to raise sons and daughters who respect themselves without having contempt for the opposite sex, here are a few guidelines:

Start by finding out what your children actually think of the opposite sex.

You might make a game of it, asking them to write (or dictate to you) an answer to how their lives would be different if they had been born the opposite sex; you can then probe further by asking what differences they would expect in each of Dr. Baumgartner's four categories (Appearance, Activities, Behavior and Treatment by Others). The results may surprise you and make a good starting point for discussion. You may not be able to dissuade your children with arguments about what boys and girls "can" and "cannot" do, but at least you'll be aware of the stage of their thinking.

Don't split children's chores and activities by gender.

"The guiding developmental rule for boys appears to be 'Don't be female,'" says Dr. Baumgartner. "Every time we reinforce that rule, we teach boys to have contempt for females."

Boys learn at a very young age that their jobs are taking out the garbage and helping Dad wash the car—and they learn that washing anything else (dishes, laundry, the baby) is for girls. This early segregation of chores not only makes boys disdainful of "women's work," but also deprives them of the chance to learn some housekeeping skills—such as cooking dinner, ironing a shirt or sewing on buttons—that they will need as adults.



Support your child's real interests and talents.

Do not support only those interests you think are right for the child's gender nor only those the child thinks he or she is restricted to. Of all high-school graduates who are academically eligible for college but don't attend, 75 per cent are women.

Do you value your children equally?

"If I were a boy," said a tenth-grade girl, "I think I would be more outspoken and confident, but I really don't know why." The "why," says Dr. Baumgartner, is that "boys usually know they are valued, whereas girls are not always sure." Girls often feel that they are taking second place in their parents' plans for them (in comparison with their brothers)—and often in their parents' respect for them as well.

Encourage your daughter's athletic interests as well as your son's.

The girls in this study showed a tremendous longing to play sports—football, baseball, even wrestling—instead of simply cheering the team on. "Sports can be a huge boost to self-confidence," says Dr. Baumgartner, "to say nothing of health."