

III: Interview with Dr. Martine F. Delfos in an important – outstanding – Dutch newspaper about her book on the sex differences: *The beauty of the difference. Why men and women are different and the same.*

Martine Delfos on the beautiful sex differences

Action or anxiety

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Men can certainly be caring when necessary, says psychologist Martine Delfos. And women can be very aggressive.

CHILDREN are the best in handling stress. Second best are men. And only then come women. In fact, when it comes to managing stress they are really poor at it. That is what psychologist Martine Delfos says. She has recently written a book about the differences between the sexes: *‘The beauty of the difference. Why men and women are different and the same.’* The book is finding fertile soil: within a few months the second edition will appear. The basis of her book is: men’s ‘readiness to take action’ in case of danger, and the relative lack thereof in women. It is Delfos’s opinion that only if these biological differences are taken into account can real emancipation can take place. “It is precisely the recognition of these differences that creates room for change.”

The book deals with the age-old issues between men and women in a refreshing way. Because Delfos also emphasizes the similarities in behaviour, *and* the huge freedom of action that men and women have. It’s about the relative differences. “The tendency is to say: the differences are caused by biology and the

similarities are caused by socialization. But the differences and similarities are *both* caused by biology *and* socialization”, Martine Delfos tells in her workroom in a green suburb of Utrecht.

And it is about *preferential behaviour*, about ‘*average tendencies*’. No one person is the same, “but why should you have to repeat that continuously?”, Delfos asks. “You don’t do that with other subjects either. No one says: ‘The average dog must know who his boss is, otherwise he will get the upper hand over his average owner’.”

Martine Delfos is an unusual appearance in the Dutch psychology-landscape. And that’s not only due to her characteristic long hair, but also to her productivity in many fields (among them textbooks on autism, eating disorders, developmental psychology and communicating with children). Her influence in the field is important both through her books and the many postdoctoral courses she gives. She has her own Psychological Institute for Consultation, Education and Scientific Research (the Dutch abbreviation is: PICOWO). Delfos: “No, Those long hairs are not a sort of relict from the sixties. Those I need to hide my shyness, although

nobody believes that! I need my little curtain. I am now 57, and only in the last ten years do I dare to come out into the open like I do now. Probably because in ageing females the testosterone level rises. One dares more!”

But Delfos, as a researcher, isn’t bound to one university. Delfos: “No, I work together with universities, but I am completely independent. I am moreover wholeheartedly a therapist, and I have been since I was a child. That is my base, and that is why I studied psychology. In fact the first twenty years I have been observing and collecting experiences as a therapist and, and later on I started building models. I am a model-builder. The problem in science is that you always have a lot of investigators of models, but almost no model-builders.”

And so Delfos finds herself somewhat in the margin of the country’s psychological research. Delfos: “Model-builders who are women *and* not bound to a university; that really is not what researchers are waiting for in the academic world! Then it is *really* hard to be taken seriously.”

“Yes”, Jan van den Bout confirms. He is Professor of clinical psychology in Utrecht and was supervisor of Delfos’ PhD about the processing of grief in French writers (1999). “If you meet her for the first time, you think: ‘what an intellect, but what she says, does it have any ground? Her individuality can elicit resistance. But when you gain more in-depth knowledge into the subject, then it becomes clear that what she does is almost always very well-founded. Delfos is just a super-intelligent psychologist and an exceptional *uomo universale* who is unusually good at integrating different fields of science. This ability is a relief in a time that everything always has to be com-

pletely empirical and theoretical integration is being neglected.”

ROLE BEHAVIOUR

Why behaviour of men and women differs is to be found in every biology- and psychology book. In almost every mammal the male is more active and aggressive and the female is more directed to care and social systems. Behind this lies the different role in reproduction. But why in the mammalian human should so much role behaviour be *interchangeable*? Delfos: “Even *that* is understandable from an evolutionary perspective. Newborn children need care for a *very* long time, longer than any animal. But men and women are not always available for ‘their’ role. And so men can – when necessary – take care of the children very well too. And women can be *very* aggressive. I have never read this biological explanation of the similarities in any evolutionary-psychological books. It is always about the differences.”

But of course the differences are there as well. Because why exactly are children better in handling stress, and especially: why are men better in that than women?

Delfos: “Children who have stress just go and do something. They also never deal with the whole problem at once. Adults usually understand little of this. They are very awkward in the way they communicate with children. If there are problems adults want to talk about it seriously and long. So children start talking about difficult subjects at the most awkward moments, when you are in a hurry and have to go out, or something like that. Because you can’t talk for very long, they only have to talk about a small part and not about the whole subject. And furthermore they have all sorts of techniques not to think about problems, which

is very useful as a stress-management tool. One day we had a five years old boy who told how he pushed away his worrisome thoughts. At those moments he just thought: 'Table, table, table'. 'Then it vanishes automatically', he says. Five years old!"

And men? Delfos: "The biggest problem with stress is the large production of stress hormones, which cause your thinking to become disturbed. The first thing to do is to *get rid of* these hormones. And that is what men do: they take action! They do this by having an argument, by running, by walking up and down, by working really hard, by carpeting, by all these things. Those actions may not always be relevant to the problems, but as a result men don't get ill from stress. Well, that is a big benefit!"

And women? "They talk. But they do that while sitting. Therefore they are hardly able to convert stress hormones. The consequence is that women are often bothered by psychosomatic diseases. Of course, by talking they process the problem and that is good. Because then the problem might be solved! But because they do this sitting, it doesn't convert much hormones, and the stress often remains."

In short, the male stays healthy and doesn't solve anything; the female solves it but gets ill? "Yes, simply put it does come down to that. So you need both of them. To talk is necessary! To do something is necessary too! *That* is the beauty of the difference, which is the title of my book. Men must teach women to take action, to convert all those stress hormones. Women must teach men to talk about problems so that they don't get flooded by hormones if they can't work because of unemployment or pension. But everyone has to do this in his own manner."

The sex hormone testosterone, which resides in much larger quantities in the blood of men than in the blood of women, is seen by Delfos as having an important role in producing differences between men and women. "Testosterone is a hormone that lowers the threshold for getting ready to go into action", Delfos explains. "Too much testosterone will lead to aggression; this has been demonstrated in innumerable research. And probably too little testosterone will lead to depression: the inability to go into action. Unfortunately little research has been carried out regarding this last connection, but recently I came across an old study in which it turned out that in people who came out of a depression, the percentage of testosterone had also risen. (*Journal of Psychiatric Research* 1991, 25/4). This still is no evidence for a connection between a small amount of testosterone and anxiousness or depression. But in that study I see a direct physiological indication for that role of testosterone", according to Delfos. "I'm only presenting hypotheses here!"

That hypothesis, that this tendency towards action in males and this tendency towards caring in females is closely linked to the proportion of testosterone, is for that matter not shared by everyone. On being asked, Lorenz van Doornen, Professor in Health Psychology in Utrecht says "Ah well, if you are such a great model builder as Delfos is, then it isn't possible that you get everything right. But that doesn't matter, because such a model helps the thinking process further. A thinking model is allowed to have holes in it. The main message about the differences between man and woman is excellent. But we have started to think much more subtly on the influence of testosterone in the last ten years: this influence isn't as clear anymore; the system is a lot more complicated than that."

Putting that much emphasis on testosterone is even, according to Van Doornen, “a bit pseudo-physiology”. “You want something to pin down the sex differences and then you take the physiological most obvious difference: the testosterone level.” But apart from that the Delfos’ system is very well built, Van Doornen emphasizes. “I have great admiration for it. Although I myself would never say that men are better in handling stress than women. I would rather say that women are a little bit better: They have more strategies to deal with it. That’s always better. Men in fact have only one strategy: ‘to do something!’ . Just as Delfos herself writes.”

Delfos thinks that calling it *pseudo-physiology* is a somewhat simple judgement. “It is not only a matter of testosterone; other hormones and neurotransmitters take part as well. The anxiety-model – which only is a part of the difference between men and women – has positively been refined since its first publication in 1997.” The basic difference between men and women is mainly to be found in their reaction to ‘danger’. Men respond to it by action: the fight-or-flight response. Women have the basic strategy of “tend-and-befriend”. Delfos: “This tend-and-befriend sounds very friendly, but usually there is a lot of manipulation going on. It’s an attempt to create safety by being liked. In her greatest virtue, being nice towards others, the woman has a double agenda. That basic female strategy is very often overlooked. “Recently a biologist who graduated on stress-behaviour in rats spoke to me. In his research they only looked at the males, because the females didn’t do anything! Why these females reacted so passively in the case of danger, was apparently not interesting.”

The basic strategy ‘action’ leads to the fact that boys – and men – place a great deal of interest in the order of ranking in their group: in con-

frontations they can then quickly decide if they have to fight or flee. Girls – and women – try to achieve a good position in the popularity-index of a group, so Delfos writes. “This strategy is effective *too*, because in principle one doesn’t attack what one likes. But it is a strategy that demands a lot of effort and constant evaluation, because ‘being liked’ is not very measurable and not very stable. It also means that women have to be self-effacing a lot to rise in the hierarchy.” An alternative for this female ‘Florence Nightingale’ caring-strategy is victimhood. That offers safety as well. A victim usually will not be attacked. And in a typical Delfos-observation she adds that men can of course choose the part of a victim *as well*, but then mainly “in a situation in which he himself feels completely secure, in which his predominance is obvious, namely in relation to a woman.”

LOVERBOYS

The tendency to search for safety, doesn’t always turn out well for women. Delfos: “In their own relationships women can be very weak. They can be *so* afraid that another person might not like her that they can’t think logically. A man can manipulate a woman very easily! You can tell this by those loverboys, who commit girls to them and then drives them into prostitution. As long as the male is positive, he can cheat a woman in the direct contact. A con man always has more success with women than with men; the only thing he has to say is: you really do look great! However, women are much better at assessing how things are going between *other* people. Yes, then women suddenly see everything. Just as long as stress doesn’t enter into the matter. They also are often better at seeing what the emotions of a man are than the man experiences himself, being less conscious of his inner processes. That must be terrifying for those

men, mustn't it?" But equally horrifying – from a male perspective – is the 'refreshing syndrome' that Delfos signals in women. "From that continuous pursuit for secure relations, women have a fairly strong, repeating need that others, in particular their partners, express their appreciation for them. Women have a more acute feelings of insecurity, probably because they can't count on their physical strength for their own protection. The need for recognition in a man is more disguised, because he has two sources for that recognition. The first source is formed by his own achievements and actions, and usually he isn't even aware of the second source: the appreciation given by the women in his life. Women give the men who are important to them fairly constant positive appreciation. That is why it is so serious when a woman stops doing that for any reason whatsoever! For women marriage is much less satisfying than for men."

CLAY AND VIEWMASTERS

In the Flemish television-documentary 'Venten strijken niet' (translated as 'Guys don't iron') the young primary school pupils get a free assignment. They can do with coloured clay whatever they like. Immediately the boys join with other boys and the girls join with other girls. The girls are creating little trees, houses and animals with their little moulds. The boys are moulding the clay, prodding at it, and smearing it out all over the table. The commentary in the documentary runs: 'the girls set themselves to work, the boys don't even get started.'

This commentary seems right, but nevertheless it is prejudiced, so Martine Delfos writes in 'The beauty of the difference'. Because according to the assignment, the children could do whatever they wanted. And the boys are, just like the girls, really *doing* something. The boys, Delfos says, are experimenting with the

clay, they are examining the material. The girls are doing what they have been taught to do with clay: they are making little figures. The advantage of the examination by the boys, is of great importance, Delfos states. Years later, when for example something in the house breaks, a man can get the idea to use the clay of the children to fix the defect. He knows the function and the nature of the clay and can apply it in a different situation, as opposed to women.

In another scene the children receive a *view-master* through which you can look and by pressing on a button the next picture in it appears. They get the assignment to let every child have a turn. In the group of girls everyone gets a turn in no time. With the boys there are quarrels and arguments about what the order should be: clockwise or counter-clockwise. After a while one boy gets excluded. The commentary says that boys fight over an object, and girls don't; they ask each other for information.

Here too the commentary seems to be right, but is nevertheless prejudiced. Boys and girls, Delfos writes, are actually busy with the same subject: the social order. Boys form a hierarchy in a rougher way than girls; they look who is physically the strongest. It is clear and it offers security. The strategy for girls is based on 'being liked'. But it isn't intended that the other sees what the intention is because then the behaviour will be perceived as manipulative. You can see this in *one* girl of about six years old. She isn't that skilled in the subtle game of the pecking order, Delfos says in her book: 'And with the furtive glances she throws at the camera people and wherein she seems to examine what they think of her, she reveals her cover. Her niceness seems hypocritical.'

NRC Handelsblad,

Newspaper in The Netherlands, 20-11-04.