



Mismeasure of Woman: Why Women Are Not the Better Sex, the Inferior Sex, or the Opposite Sex

Carol Tavis

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When "man is the measure of all things," woman is forever trying to measure up. In this enlightening book, Carol Tavis unmasks the widespread but invisible custom -- pervasive in the social sciences, medicine, law, and history -- of treating men as the normal standard, women as abnormal. Tavis expands our vision of normalcy by illuminating the similarities between women and men and showing that the real differences lie not in gender, but in power, resources, and life experiences.

Winner of the American Association for Applied and Preventive Psychology's Distinguished Media Contribution Award

Mismeasure of Woman: Why Women Are Not the Better Sex, the Inferior Sex, or the Opposite Sex Details

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Author : Carol Tavis

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Lawrence Bish says

This book was one of many that have opened my eyes to hidden flaws in my own and the general perceptions of our world, our behaviors, our beliefs and our social practices. A significant and wonderful contribution towards correcting some of the more ignorant problems of western society.

Chris Pederson says

'Equality as acceptance means that instead of regarding cultural and reproductive differences as problems to be eliminated, we would aim to eliminate the unequal consequences that follow from them.' AWESOME book and met Carol at TAM8, super nice!

Lindsay says

I am not an extreme feminist or anything... but I recommend this book for every woman! I took a psyc. of women class and this book summed it all up. It really makes you think about the issues of being a woman in today's society.

Anne says

A dense read, but many fascinating hypotheses. Her basic premise is that men and women are more alike than different, which current theory in science, (biological, sociological, sexually, in communication) has men and women on polar opposites in most areas. And she posits that this hypothesis holds true in most of the animal kingdom below humans. Sort of a plea to us to not judge the opposite sex so stringently.

Darnell says

This is an excellent overview of the subject despite the dated studies, as all but a few are still valid and relevant. The critique of common methodologies and several key experiments gives grounds to ignore 90% of gender-related headlines out of hand, which in my opinion is worth the cover price alone.

Tanjua says

Sally says

Examines critically basic assumptions and "conventional wisdom" underlying the stories modern culture tells about women, and that women tell about themselves, whether dealing with their relation to men, health and psychological issues, social roles, sex, body image, etc. It points out that presenting women as opposite to men, better or worse than men, or the same as men, all involve evaluating women against the cultural norm of the universal male instead of taking women as they are in themselves. A social psychologist, the author promotes social and cultural change as a means to solve women's problems, instead of seeing such problems as stemming from inadequacies or pathologies of individual women.

Karen-Leigh says

When a man is the measure of all things...women are always trying to measure up. The custom of treating man as the normal standard, woman as abnormal. The real differences lie not in gender, but in power, resources and life experiences.

Valerie says

Stephen Jay Gould noted with delight that the title of this book was borrowed from his own *The Mismeasure of Man*. The main issue here (as I read it), is that the 'average human' is not a '60 kilogram man', and medical studies that assume so are bound to be misleading--often fatally so. As John Glenn objects to being an 'n of 1' in his research project comparing the effects of aging with the effects of weightlessness, one main goal of this book is to have more studies done on women, or (better yet) on both men and women, of varying sizes, shapes, etc. The median is not (and must not be) the message.

Naomi says

This was a good read - it brought to light a lot of biased ways of thinking about differences between the sexes (and lack thereof) that I may not have noticed previously without being strictly pro-women/anti-man. I thought it was very balanced and also well-written in general.

Emily says

This book is the wiser and more knowledgeable sister of *The Beauty Myth*. Some material is, thankfully, out of date, thanks to 20 years of progress in queer advocacy. But Tavris's discussion of legal equality vs. legal sameness, and of the medicalization of women's hormonal cycle (and the failure to medicalize the far more hazardous mood swings of men!) is still on point.

On hysterectomy for a 'precancerous' diagnosis: "Although prostate cancer is far more common than uterine cancer, no one recommends preventative surgery on the prostate. The very idea would make most men premurderous."

Lindsay says

This book is a critique of two popular fallacies about men and women: gender essentialism (the idea that all men and all women resemble their own sex and differ from the other sex in the same ways) and universalizing maleness (using the average man as a stand-in for the average *person*). She mostly tackles essentialism in popular culture and psychology, particularly by looking critically at the studies cited as proof of gender stereotypes (say, that women are more empathic) and identifying factors those studies neglected to consider, and comparing them to studies that *did* factor those things in; usually, the gender gap narrows to insignificance in the more rigorous studies. Universalizing of maleness, on the other hand, is more often seen in medicine (where doctors learn anatomy and surgery from male bodies, and test medications and study disease primarily in men, with female physiology considered as an afterthought, if at all) and law (where one's actions often have to pass a "reasonable-man" test, which obscures the fact that a reasonable woman will often not make the same choices that would be reasonable for a man, especially when it comes to self-defense). Also noteworthy is her take on PMS, which she largely does not believe exists.

Very informative, and a great resource for gender-difference myths and facts. (Tavris does **NOT** believe men and women are the same; she merely believes that what differences do exist are small and fairly specialized, and that the variation *within* each sex is many times wider than that between the sexes).

The only caveat I have about it is that it was written in 1992, so there is probably a lot of gender-related research (both legitimate and in need of debunking) from recent years that will not be addressed here. Which is too bad, since I would love to see what Tavris thinks of Simon Baron-Cohen's hypothesis that autism is an extreme version of the normal, "male" brain.

Cat. says

Giving up. Too deep (hah), and I feel like I'm living my early thirties all over again. Which is not a good thing in my case. Don't like the cover either.

I would recommend it for research. It has some gems of information in there in the Nature v. Nurture argument. But I'm just not up for this right now.

Caley says

Absolutely fantastic. The best, most complete, and most helpful book on gender I've ever read. Tavris' ideas deal mostly with the cage our culture imposes by evaluating women to male standards and demanding they adhere to female standards simultaneously. What she does that so many other feminist authors fail to do, though, is offer coherent solutions.

Tavris is a psychologist, and does a very good job of backing up her claims with research. Much of it is

dated, though, so as always I suggest looking further into things for yourself. I found most of her assertions held up very well to more up-to-date findings, and those that were incorrect were simply due to inadequate research available at the time (her denial of the g-spot and female ejaculation has since been proven wrong). She is also very fair to men, and maintains that both genders suffer from their culturally-imposed roles.

Most importantly, she points out the error in much feminist (and other) thought about gender: the tendency to polarize things such as nature vs. nurture, equality vs. separate spheres, good vs. bad characteristics of masculine vs. feminine behavior. Her main idea is that we should focus on achieving equality in our *results*, not just our laws and policies. Treating men and women equally is the ideal, but it ignores the cultural barriers placed on women's achievement and personal growth - and in most cases, women are blamed for this because they fail to act like men and assert themselves in the workplace, demand equal share of housework and childrearing, etc.

Not only that, but there are some things that simply do not have a proper male/female analogy: how do we treat maternity leave in a way that is "fair" when there is no comparable male experience? Is it fair to think of pregnancy as a disability? Tavis deals with these and other problems with such awareness and intelligence that her ideas continue to prove true almost twenty years after the book was written.

Belenen says

Written by a psychologist, *The Mismeasure of Woman* explores studies on 'gender', focusing on the psychological and social aspects, with a basic section on the brain studies. It took me a while to work through because it's a dense read -- there are so many studies and articles mentioned that the bibliography is 42 pages long. It's quite the emotional rollercoaster! It's infuriating and depressing to realize how much science and society have lied about and mistreated women (and men, though not in the same way); it's exciting and empowering to realize that there is so much human potential that has been ignored or repressed; and it's laugh-out-loud funny in parts thanks to the dry, sometimes sarcastic tone of the author. Despite the fact-dump, it's interesting and entertaining. Also, the author speaks in a genuinely equalist tone; ze doesn't drift into ridiculous "men are the REAL victims here" bullshit but neither does ze ignore the fact that these stereotypes are damaging to men also. Ze challenges both sexes not only to step out of their own roles but to challenge their own ideals and help others step out of those roles.
