

Divided by Gender, United by Chocolate: Differences in the Boardroom

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Chapter 1: Gender Stereotypes

Stereotyping is a way of combining together the attributes of a group of people or things into a shared social concept that we all understand. A stereotype is therefore a *heuristic*; a kind of useful cognitive shortcut to stop us from having to think too hard about the characteristics of the people who make up the group. *'Pink for a girl and blue for a boy'* is a typical modern, culturally derived, western gender stereotype with which we are all familiar, although interestingly, historically, the colours were reversed. It was only in the 1950's and 60's that pink became more associated with femininity. As heuristics, stereotypes and stereotyping can be useful to us, apart from the fact that stereotypes are rarely the actual reality, because of course there are always exceptions to every rule of thumb. Whilst we all use them, we should also be aware that they are going to be wrong at times and so we should use them mindfully and with caution.

Interestingly, we all intuitively know that the whole gender stereotyping thing doesn't really work anyway. Whilst the Conservatives were elected on economic policy and an effective electoral campaign in 1979, when Margaret Thatcher became the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom many UK residents thought that it might herald a new era of politics and culture; an era of gentler, less aggressive and less combative politics, with a greater focus on collaboration and nurturing perhaps. Margaret Thatcher was a mother after all. How mistaken and naïve we were! Margaret Thatcher, it turned out, was more dominant, aggressive and competitive than the vast majority of male politicians, in both her own Conservative cabinet and those of the Liberal and Labour opposition parties.

Just because Margaret Thatcher was a woman, is there any reason why we should think that she would be kind, gentle and nurturing? Actually, research suggests that that's exactly what we would think¹. Stereotypically, we expect women to be collaborative and compliant, both at work and at home. We somehow expect them to be kind,

loving, gentle, supportive, understanding, communicative, empathetic, intuitive, altruistic and compassionate. However, whilst some men are indeed like this, clearly not all women are.

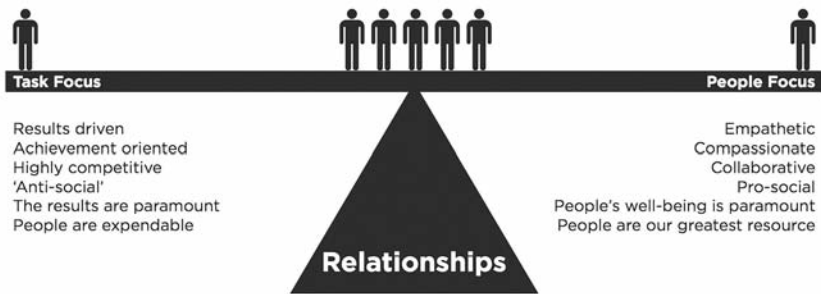
Moreover, when a woman goes against female stereotypical expectations and behaves in ways which are not considered naturally feminine and nurturing, but which are more 'masculine', research also suggests that she is judged much more harshly for her actions than we would judge a man for doing the same thing¹. We seem to have certain assumptions regarding men and women in management and leadership roles which, in practice, do not always turn out to be correct. While not going into the whole gendered leadership styles debate, (there are other books around for that), this book will give you a new perspective towards understanding some of the reasons why people behave as they do. It will also provide insights into leader and manager behaviours, and it will even explore people's neurobiological motivations for achieving such positions of responsibility in the first place. First and foremost however, and perhaps this is the most important thing of all, this book will help you to understand *yourself*.

As a UK Chartered Psychologist who is focused on linking thinking and behaviour, I've always maintained that *the thinking comes first*. Sometimes it's deliberate, but even if the thinking is either unconscious, or is an emotional response, there is definitely something that happens within us before our actual behaviour occurs. We rationalise it by calling it either intuition or strategy. I used to believe, probably somewhat arrogantly in retrospect, that I had somehow managed to get it right by tracking back from the behaviour to the underpinning thinking which motivated it. It was this line of thought which led me to develop the Thinking Styles™ questionnaire and report to assist people in understanding their own cognitive style strategies and enabling them to think more effectively. Nearly twenty years later I now realise that I was only right up to a point. I have now come to the belief that in part, it is our biological/hormonal make-up which influences and drives our thinking and therefore our subsequent

behaviours. I had missed a step and not tracked things back far enough!

I'm now going to introduce you to a model that you may already be familiar with. Whether you are aware of it or not, it forms the basis of a number of modern theories around leadership and leadership approaches. It has been recognised that there are significant differences in the way that leaders, (and in fact everybody, not just leaders), consider these two things as far back as the ancient Greeks and Romans. It is the People/Task Continuum.

People vs Task Focus



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I have simplified the model for you and summarised the key principles. As you can see, the continuum is effectively a model of opposites and I've put these opposite beliefs and behaviours at each end of the scale. The people on the continuum represent the distribution curve. As with all normal distribution curves, where the sample size is large enough, there will be more people whose preference is in the middle of the scale than there will be at each end of it, as statistically speaking, 68% of people will always fall within the 'average' range. The triangle upon which the continuum balances contains the word

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'relationships'. This is because relationships underpin the model; where you sit on the scale will effect and affect the relationships that you have with your colleagues.

To explain the model I am going to describe the beliefs and behaviours at the extreme ends of the scale. Most people, while they will have tendencies in a particular direction, will not think or behave quite so radically. People with a Task Focus are very achievement oriented, they are highly competitive, often believing that the end justifies the means and they will cut corners, even being unethical in their decisions and behaviours, so strong is their desire to win. For them, the results they want to achieve are paramount, and for them, people are expendable. At the extreme end of the Task Focused scale we are likely to see a small percentage of people exhibiting 'leadership detailers'. We will be exploring these in more depth in Chapter 7.

In contrast, those leaders and managers with a People Focus are very others oriented, and are highly pro-social, being focused on developing long-term, positive, sustainable relationships. For them, people are the most important consideration, above the task and the results. They are kind, caring, very supportive of colleagues and highly collaborative. They strongly believe that all tasks, objectives, outcomes and results are ultimately for the benefit of people, and they are much more interested in, and driven by, compassion and empathy than they are by either winning or achieving set objectives and corporate results. They don't derail as such, but rather, without any focus on goals, targets, objectives and outputs, they are much less likely to be promoted to positions of leadership in the first instance.

Do you know where your preference is on the scale? Do you have one set point on the scale or do you have the behavioural and cognitive flexibility to move up and down it? Here are two exercises that I have used in management and leadership development programmes across all industries and sectors for many years and they are always a source of interest and debate.

Exercise 1

- Put an 'X' on the scale that is your normal set point at work. This is your *position 1*.
- Put a second 'X' on the scale where you are when you are being your absolute best self. This is your *position 2*.
- What do you already notice about the difference in position between the two 'X' points? How is the quality of your relationships with other people affected here, when you are being your best self? How is the quality of your relationship with yourself affected? What insights does this simple exercise give you already?
- Where does your 'X' move to when you are under stress and pressure at work? This is your *position 3*.
- How are your relationships with your team, your colleagues, your boss and your family and friends affected when you are in position 3? What things might you be able to do so that you can get back into your position 1, and ideally, your best-self position 2? There will be actions and strategies that you can put in place which will support you. And, in fact, the best time to do them will be as soon as you notice yourself beginning to move from your position 1.

I can guarantee at least two things here: firstly, that your position 3 X won't be in the same place as it is at position 2 when you are being your best self; and secondly, that when you are under stress in position 3, the quality of your relationships with those around you and probably with yourself will be affected, and not in a good way. If you want to print out a copy of the model so you can physically plot your various positions on the continuum, you can download it free of charge at www.unitedbychocolate.com.

Exercise 2

- This exercise will identify your range of flexibility on the continuum. Looking at Diagram 1, put an 'A' on the left side

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where you feel comfortable operating up to, bearing in mind that your task focus will become more extreme, (at the expense of people), the further towards the left end of the scale you go.

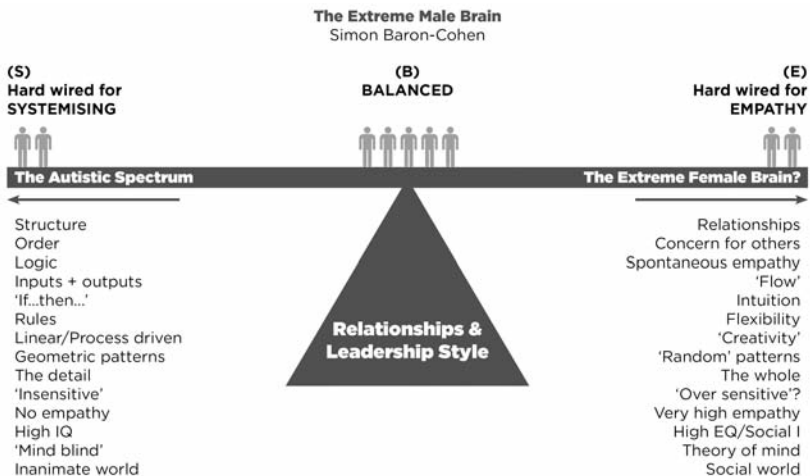
- Now put a 'B' on the right side of the continuum towards the People Focus end of the scale where you also feel comfortable operating.
- Join the two points, 'A' and 'B' with a straight line, putting a little arrow head for clarity, like this, <-----> . This represents your 'comfort zone' on the continuum.
- Now add two more arrows, also with double arrow heads, on the other side of your 'A' and 'B' points, like this <----> A< ----> B <-----> (remember your arrows will be the length that is representative of your scores and may not look like the ones I have used here for illustrating the point). These two new outside arrows represent your ability to operate on the scale outside of your comfort zone.
- This is very useful information to have, especially when you can recognise it. In fact, the military in the UK design many of their leadership development exercises deliberately to push people outside of their natural area of comfort whilst still being able to operate effectively, until such a time when they can move back to within their comfort zone. This is especially critical in a war zone situation where a leader's order may well mean that, potentially, not all of their military personnel may come back in one piece, or at all.
- The longer your lines are and the more of the continuum you are able to cover, the greater your flexibility will be, and therefore the more flexible, supportive and yet achievement-oriented you will be.

Let's see whether there's any scientific evidence to support the People/Task Continuum theory and at the same time let's also consider what else might potentially be going on in the bodies and brains of men and women from a biological perspective.

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I would like to introduce you to the work of Simon Baron-Cohen, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at the University of Cambridge in the UK. He is the Director of the University's Autism Research Centre, and has spent more than 20 years working with people who have autism. He has developed a theory which he calls *Extreme Male Brain Theory*². Whilst the majority of people diagnosed on the autistic spectrum are male, according to recent research, there is a significant percentage of women who also have autism and therefore paradoxically also seem to have predominantly *male* brains! Could this also mean then that potentially there is a significant percentage of men who could be said to have predominantly *female* brains?

I've adapted Baron-Cohen's theory for you in Diagram 2 so that it's easier to understand some of the differences between a 'male' and a 'female' brain. Of course, there's no such thing as a gendered brain *per se*; however, as a framework and as a psychological metaphor, viewing the brain through the lens of behaviours which are predominantly male compared to behaviours which are predominantly female, does seem to yield a useful perspective.



Adapted from Baron-Cohen, S., (2002). The extreme male brain theory of autism. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 6, (6) pp.248–254.

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Diagram 2 details a number of different and, similar to the earlier People/Task continuum, seemingly opposite behaviours and ways of thinking. At one end of the scale we have the extreme male brain, which Baron-Cohen suggests is 'hard-wired' for Systemising things, and at the other end of the scale we have the extreme female brain, which is hard-wired for Empathising with others. Hard-wiring is a concept which suggests a biological pre-disposition within the brain for thinking in a certain way. This is compared to neurological, 'brain plasticity' which is a concept suggesting the flexibility of the brain to lay down new neural pathways for thinking and behaving.

The Autistic Spectrum exists at the extreme male brain side of the scale, with autistic behaviours increasing in predominance and severity the further away from the middle of the scale you go. At the opposite end of the scale there is the extreme female brain, and according to some recent research, at this end of the scale there is a percentage of people who display psychosis, i.e. a distorted sense of reality, and that more of them are female than male³. In the middle section of the scale there is a balance of male and female behaviours, suggesting the behavioural flexibility to engage usefully in both male and female cognitive and behavioural strategies.

I would suggest that we don't exist at one point of the scale, but rather like the People/Task Continuum, we have an x and y point of behaviours within which we feel comfortable operating. In other words, we have a spectrum of behaviours and strategies, and it is very likely that there will be some similarities for you in your scores and ranges for each of the two models. For some people, their comfort range might be quite short, whilst others will have a much broader range. Additionally, people's ranges might start and end at different points. Once again, the longer someone's span is on the scale, the more flexible their cognitive, emotional and behavioural strategies will be. Therefore the more adaptable and effective team member, colleague and leader they will be.

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If you would like to download the diagram and plot your own range, you will find it on the book's website at www.unitedbychocolate.com where you can download it free of charge.

Baron-Cohen suggests that the autistic, male brain is hard-wired for systemising. The Systemising brain is highly logical with structure and order being extremely important to the person. They are very uncomfortable with ambiguity as they need everything to be clearly defined and precise. I've used the word need here deliberately. Towards the middle of the scale, in the balanced region, someone may prefer, want or desire structure and order, logic, precision and definition. The nearer towards the extreme end of the male brain scale someone operates at, the more they actually have a cognitive, emotional and possibly even physical need for these things.

Because the Systemising brain is so linear, it functions on rules, often ones it makes up itself, (if they seem logical to it). It also operates on 'if, ... then' rules and with a focus on the inputs and outputs of a system or of the elements within the system, be that mathematics, physics or counting Lego bricks. The Systemising brain likes straight lines and geometric patterns, and, consistent with precision, definition, focused attention and logic, craves detail.

The focus on systemising, compared to a focus on empathising with other people, means that at the extreme, people who have this kind of cognitive and emotional preference can be perceived as being insensitive and lacking empathy. Whilst they may sometimes have a high intelligence quotient, (IQ, with its focus on logic), they may well be 'mind blind'. This is a psychological term which suggests that they are not able to formulate a Theory of Mind regarding what other people might be thinking or feeling. Normally developed pre-school children of about three years of age can predict that if a sibling or friend loses a much cherished toy, they will feel sad and may even cry about it. A child, manager or leader who is mind blind is incapable of understanding someone else's perspective or empathising with them, and will appear very cold and uncaring. They feel much more at home

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within an inanimate world of numbers, things or avatars on a computer, than they do with real people.

Real people however are very much the focus of the person with an Empathising brain, a brain Baron-Cohen calls an 'extreme female brain'. It's no accident that when we teasingly accuse a man of being in touch with his feminine side, we are effectively recognising their compassionate, caring, kind and nurturing people-oriented behaviours. The Empathising brain is hard-wired to focus on other people and relationships and to read faces in ways a mind-blind person is simply not able to. This results in an empathising person having a very high emotional intelligence quotient, and equally high social intelligence. It is the social world which fascinates them and is the focus of their attention. At this end of this scale someone would be highly intuitive and would also be flexible in the sense that they are comfortable with spontaneity and ambiguity.

You will see that I have said 'creativity?' regarding the Empathising brain. This is because here, people are 'creative' by connecting seemingly random thoughts and events, which of course don't seem random to them, but would seem so to a more logical and linear thinker. The question mark is used because it's perfectly possible to be creative logically as well. However, when we think of creativity, we usually think of it as it manifests itself at this end of the scale, with an intuitive, spontaneous, innovative, imaginative and original approach.

I have also used the word 'flow'. I've used it to describe a brain which becomes completely absorbed in something in the moment. In psychology, a 'flow experience' is one where we are completely immersed in a task with a feeling of enjoyment and energised focus. It's the state that we go into when we meditate or when we become completely absorbed by our favourite hobby. Time seems to stand still, and yet the time we spend also seems to pass in an instant. In sports we often refer to it as being 'in the zone'. I would suggest that it's the Empathising brain which moves into this state most readily and

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easily, as the Systemising brain becomes focused rather than relaxed when something engages its attention.

After many years of studying people's thinking and behaviours, I have come to believe that there is genius at both ends of the continuum. Probably not right at the very ends, possibly there we do indeed find autism and psychosis as Baron-Cohen and his colleagues suggest. However, I do think that perhaps we may find it a little way in from the very ends of the scale in people who are flexible enough to also be able to access and use the benefits that the opposite end of the scale offers; in other words, people who can be both highly logical and highly intuitive.

Have you recognised the similarities between the two models of the People/Task Focus continuum and the Extreme Male/Female Brain? According to our cultural gender stereotypes, women are expected to be generally more selfless, nurturing and concerned with others than men; this is known as being more communal. In contrast, men are expected to be, and are generally perceived as being, more agentic, that is, more assertive and motivated to master and control others⁴.

This book is called *Divided by Gender*, and there is no doubt that there are indeed physical biological differences between the two sexes; even five-year-old children understand that. However, having biological sex differences regarding genitalia, doesn't mean that all men will be agentic and all women will be communal, as we all know from our own experience. As both models show quite clearly, just because someone has a certain physical gender, it doesn't mean that we can accurately predict how they will think or behave when it comes to decision-making. Gender diversity is an illusion from that perspective. Gender doesn't help us in predicting how someone will approach an ethical dilemma or even, more generally, their working style and their manner towards their colleagues.

*We need diversity of thinking not diversity of gender;
it's not a sex thing!*

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This book and the theory of Leadership Temperament Types will forever change the way that we think about diversity in the Boardroom, which is what we are now going on to explore in Chapter 2 where we are going to learn more about gendered leadership and leadership stereotypes. Let's see if they stand up to scrutiny any better than gender diversity has regarding men and women's stereotypical thinking and behaviour.