

DIALOGUE

Biology isn't destiny

By Beth Maschinot

Memorial Day. We've done the rites—guacamole, bean dip and chicken. We huddle around the TV on the patio as our modern warriors, the Bulls, outshoot and outmaneuver the Knicks on TV. In the backyard, the girls and boys wield heavy plastic waterguns, shooting furiously at each other. Later, when the girls go in to watch *Monty Python*, the six boys pair up. Time for hand-to-hand combat, all wrestling, no punches allowed.

The parents, lefties all, watch in rapt attention, making comments on how evenly or unevenly matched each twosome is. One mom talks proudly about how she has a friend who's been giving her son wrestling tips. A father says, with some surprise, that even though his son has been in the room while he's flipped through cable channels showing wrestling, the boy

hasn't shown much interest—"yet." A non-parent, a man who is the most talkative, sociable person there, says to everyone as we watch the matches, "Don't you think that boys just are more aggressive than girls?" Some days, with a more familiar crowd, this would have brought out the attack dog in me. Maybe that was Bruce's intent, to pump some wind in the fast-fading group. But today, the combination of situational shyness and four margaritas keeps me quiet. (Or is it that on those other days my estrogen had ebbed, allowing my testosterone to be prominent, while today I'm just "all woman"?)

In his book, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, written in 1973, sociologist Stephen Goldberg claims that in every society on anthropological record (all 1,200 of them), males have a greater drive toward dominance in both hier-

archies and in male-female relationships. Because these realities are so universal, Goldberg argues that it is the presence of biological differences that must make it so. He chooses testosterone as that differential factor.

In the May 31 *In These Times*, Helen Fisher argues that the biological evidence that supports Goldberg's theory should be taken seriously. She baldly asserts that there is a "clear link between testosterone and aggression" and that "high rank is associated with high levels of male hormones in males and monkeys."

Such biological arguments are seductive because they seem so, well, hard-wired, essential, unmessy, just plain *real*. The problem is that when testosterone is used as the soundbite answer to differences in aggression and dominance between genders, factors like historical role differentiation, current gender socialization and the realities of sex discrimination get left by the wayside.

Goldberg's title says it all. If dominance can be reduced to aggression, which can be reduced to testosterone, then men as a group will always "have the upper hand." He who has the testosterone rules the world. But Goldberg's work has been faulted from many directions in the intervening 20 years since his book appeared.

Most scientists agree that the fetal brain is "sexed" at birth, with boys receiving more testosterone and girls more estrogen. But unpacking the link between fetal brain hormones and different behavior between the sexes is a much more complex business than Goldberg allows, and has been the subject of well-regarded books by biologists—notably *Myths of Gender* by Ann Fausto-Sterling and *Science and Gender* by Ruth Bleier.

First, as always, is the sticky problem of definition: what do we mean by aggression? Though Goldberg doesn't define his main concept, he says that aggression or dominance "manifests

itself in the satisfaction of many needs: dominance behavior, competitiveness ... a desire for control and power, and many other impositions of the will on the environment." All this is due to testosterone, according to Goldberg.

In the biological and social science research, pinning down just what aggression is has also been difficult. At times it's regarded as thoughts or actions taken with the intent to harm others; at other times it's synonymous with assertion, ambition or competitiveness. Some "hard" biology research that relates levels of testosterone in the blood with "aggression" defines aggression as "angry feelings," and some even use "depression" as a proxy for angry feelings. This is not academic hair-splitting. It shows the difficulty of doing so-called "hard science" research without the conflation of social and biological categories.

Contrary to many lay people's belief, the question is not easily answerable by hooking up some "testosterometer" and counting behaviors. In fact, Fausto-Sterling argues that it makes little sense to measure a single hormone out of context and to use that measurement to posit a causal relationship with a particular behavior. The relationship among hormones, and between hormones and behavior, is too complex for that, with the possible exception of the more direct relationship of testosterone and sex drive.

In one compelling real-life "experiment," Fausto-Sterling points out that in 18 cases of prisoners chemically castrated for violent crimes in the '50s and '60s, nine of these men later died from violent confrontations after their release from prison. Although the castration obliterated their sex drive, it apparently didn't have much effect on their aggression.

And though there was some positive correlation in other studies, Fausto-Sterling issues the warning, often overlooked, that correlation does not imply causation. In other words, aggressive acts may help raise the level of testosterone in the blood, not the other way around. Another crack in the myth of the testosterone-pumped

warrior is a '70s research study showing that the stress of preparing for battle caused the testosterone level of U.S. soldiers to *drop precipitously*.

Psychologists most often think of aggression as an intention to inflict harm. The research on sex differences in aggression finds that, yes, a minority of men tend to act out their hostilities in physical ways more often than women do, especially when they've been taunted in some way. However, studies show that women, as a group, tend to use more psychological forms of aggression, such as verbal abuse or more elaborate schemes for revenge. Also, when asked, women will say they refrain from more physical acts because they're afraid of both the physical and social consequences, not because they wouldn't like to wallop someone now and again. And women do, in fact, get physical when their kids' safety is at stake.

Anthropologists, too, notably Eleanor Burke Leacock in *Myths of Male Dominance*, have had a field day with Goldberg's finding of male "dominance assertion" in every culture. Leacock reports on societies such as that of the Paliyans, forest hunters of India, where a strict egalitarianism between the sexes on matters of importance to both of them is observed. In some societies, hard for us to fathom, "striving for status" is not identical to "dominance" over other people, as Goldberg seems to suggest. In many hunter-gatherer societies, the man who is faster, stronger, braver or more intelligent than other men—and therefore manages to get more game—is given prestige only if he shares his spoils and is modest about his success.

Women in these societies are thought by many anthropologists to have an equal say in the decisions of the tribe. If testosterone levels are the cause of dominance, are men in certain societies particularly lacking? Or are there other social and economic imperatives that are more influential in the divvying up of status and power in a group?

Another story brought to mind by Memorial Day: My uncle Matt was a

quiet guy who took care of his handicapped daughter. In our brutal youth we sometimes made fun of him because of his shyness and passivity. The same behavior—the hovering attention to our needs, the quiet handling of his handicapped daughter—would probably have been read as "gentle" if he had been a woman, but at the time we thought he was just plain weird.

After he died, we saw pictures of a more confident-looking Matt. Our aunts told us other stories of him as a boy, how he used to be the leader: "All the boys would gather around Matt, and he would organize the games, or break up the fights. He was full of confidence; when he would walk down the street, gangs of boys would follow him."

We asked what happened, not really trusting our aunts' memories. They told us how he went to war when he was 20, full of the patriotism of that time. He was assigned to the signal corps, guiding the bombers off the ships and on toward their targets. When he got back home, he would look at all the pictures of the ravaged cities and towns of Europe, civilians maimed and killed. He sat in the attic for months, staring. My grandmother eventually coaxed him down, but in place of his confidence, there was more restraint. There was also a great deal of empathy.

The change wasn't temporary. But maybe if it were, or if Matt were a monkey and not a man, maybe then we could talk about stress lowering testosterone, leaving him "weak"—just like a woman. I prefer to think that something more human was involved, perhaps the painful acknowledgment of what unbridled dominance can bring. Now perhaps more often the province of women, this realization, too, can be a "manly" trait. But if we take Goldberg's point of view—as endorsed by Fisher—we risk losing sight of this. We also end up valorizing those socialized traits of men that keep our Memorial Days full of unhappy memories.

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I N T H E A R T S

Girlz n the hood

Three summer movies— one of them re-released after two decades— struggle with the image of African-American women.

By Pat Dowell

The new generation of African-American filmmakers has its roots in a film about a woman—Spike Lee's 1986 debut feature, *She's Gotta Have It*. Nonetheless, the absence of credible women seems to be as much a defining flaw in black films as it is in white ones.

Every subsequent Spike Lee movie has baffled me anew with the brilliant writer-director's nagging inability to get out of the way of his own sketchy female creations. Right down to formidable Angela Bassett as Betty Shabazz in *Malcolm X*, Lee's female characters continue to exist largely as mirrors of manhood, charters of moral progress for their men, uncomprehending temptresses (if they're white) or gatekeepers of the culture (if they're black).

At least Lee, for all his stumbling, puts women in his movies who live and

breathe enough for you to remember them. It's hard to recall the female characters in *House Party*, *New Jack City*, *Posse*, *Chameleon Street* (which is otherwise a neglected masterpiece), or even *Boyz N the Hood*. Think of any Eddie Murphy movie, but especially *Boomerang*, to get an idea of the stereotypes—the mammy-to-be or the man-eater or, simply, the target of opportunity—black women fall into, even in black-directed movies.

Murphy's movies have women in them for the same reason white movies once had servile blacks in them—to demonstrate the protagonist's superiority, because he needs to conquer women. The whole comic point of *Boomerang*, even its title, is that he can't do that to Robin Givens.

Most of the new gangsta movies don't have time for women other than as decor. (See both Mario van Peebles efforts, *New Jack City* and *Posse*.) In this year's most praised African-American film, *Menace II Society*, the Hughes brothers (see *In These Times*, June 28) seem to draw their cinematic

lineage from the bloodsoaked Brian De Palma of *Scarface* and from virtuoso of violence Sam Peckinpah. It's a boyz' world they sculpt ingeniously with gunfire and gutter talk, in which the worst insult to a man is to call him a bitch.

In their testosterone-heavy story of one reluctant homey's fall, the Hughes brothers do make room for a female counterweight. Ronnie, played by Jada Pinkett, has already survived the loss of one lover (to prison), and her house serves as a cool, calm refuge for Caine (Tyrin Turner) as he is nudged along the path to almost certain death by friends like the cheerful killer O-Dog (a hip-hop version of Joe Pesci's loose cannon in *Goodfellas*).

Ronnie gets a ticket out of South-Central, a job in Atlanta, and she wants to take Caine with her. She's a little more vivid than the average symbol, but symbol she is, a nurturer with a son. She functions not so much as a character, but as the alternative to blood on the pavement.

Menace II Society may be the critics' darling, but the No. 1 ticket-seller in America as I write is *Poetic Justice*. In this film, director John Sin-



Menace II Society
Albert and Allen Hughes

Poetic Justice
John Singleton

Nothing But a Man
Michael Roemer