on gender chauvinism

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abstract — Male chauvinism is the belief that men are morally superior to women. Female chauvinism is the belief that women are morally superior to men. Both depend on the assumption of essential or natural gender differences between men and women with regards to thinking styles, most easily summarized as male principle-based thinking and female empathic thinking. There is no evidence for such a gender difference, however, but there is evidence that differences in experience and circumstances can lead to relevant differences. People who care (often women) become more caring, for example. By implication, gender chauvinism is based on false premises, and therefore, its superiority claims are false as well. Moreover, because both male and female chauvinism imply that it is socially preferable if women focus on caring tasks and occupation before taking on other jobs, both promote the same social inequality, and consequently, female chauvinism is anti-feminist.

1.

Male chauvinism is the belief that men are superior to women. Female chauvinism is just the reverse. Either variety of gender chauvinism can be unpacked in a number of ways, but I want to focus here (at least initially) on two chauvinisms that are each other’s mirror image and that start with the following two premises:

[MP] Male thinking is more focused on and guided by abstract principles, and is therefore more rational, contractual, and impersonal.

[FE] Female thinking is more focused on and guided by empathy, and is therefore more emotional, caring, and personal.

The two chauvinisms share these two premises but differ in their third premise and, therefore, in their conclusions. Male chauvinism continues as follows:

[PS] Thinking that is focused on and guided by abstract principles (and that is more rational, contractual, and impersonal) is superior to thinking that is focused on and guided by empathy (and that is more emotional, caring, and personal).

[MS] Therefore, men are superior to women.

1 Version of 03/19/2016.
And female chauvinism as follows:

**[ES]** Thinking that is focused on and guided by empathy (and that is more emotional, caring, and personal) is superior to thinking that is focused on and guided by abstract principles (and that is more rational, contractual, and impersonal).

**[FS]** Therefore, women are superior to men.

This paper analyzes these arguments with the aim of pointing out a number of serious flaws. These arguments deserve this attention because more or less sophisticated versions of either argument appear frequently in non-academic discussions about gender roles and gender equality, but also play a role in the background of more academic debates on these and related issues. It is hard to miss the female chauvinism in Caroll Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* (1982) or Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* (1989), for example. This female chauvinism is a special case of what Iddo Landau (1997) has called the “good-women-bad-men” bias, which is as common in (academic and popular) feminist thought, as male chauvinism elsewhere.

The first problem for the arguments as presented above is that they are invalid. The conclusions do not follow from the premises because [MS] and [FS] are about superiority of people, while premises [PS] and [ES] are about superiority of thinking styles. This problem can easily be fixed, however, by means of a bridging premise like the following:

**[B]** If group x thinks in a way that is superior to the way of thinking of group y, then group x is superior to group y.

If [B] is added as a premise, then conclusions [MS] and [FS] do follow, and thus the arguments are valid, which raises the question whether they are sound – that is, whether their premises are true.

The truth of a premise depends on two things, the meaning of that premise, and the way the world is. In their current form, [PS], [ES], and [B] are all meaningless, however, because being superior is not a two-place predicate as these premises suggest, but a three-place predicate involving the superior, the inferior, and something like a context. It is meaningless to say that x is superior to y without specifying in what sense one is supposed to be superior to the other.

The kind or context of superiority in the conclusions is usually moral superiority, which means something like “being more capable of making moral, political, and/or other socially

2 Of the two variants of gender chauvinism, male chauvinism is, of course, the better known. To my knowledge, the first influential use of the notion of female chauvinism as understood in this paper was that by Betty Friedan in her *It Changed My Life* (1976).

3 Either variant of gender chauvinism is an example of what I called “crude othering” elsewhere. (See Brons 2015.)
important decisions”. Superiority in [PS] and [ES] is not moral superiority in the same sense, however, as ways of thinking are not themselves capable of making decisions. The most plausible candidate kind/context of superiority in [PS] and [ES] is something like usefulness in the sense of “most likely to produce desirable results”. A way of thinking is superior to another if – in a given context – it is most likely to produce desirable results (in that context). For example, logical thinking is superior when one wants to solve a logic problem, and empathic thinking is superior when one wants to understand (what’s wrong with) a crying child. Here the context of superiority is that of moral, political, and/or other socially important decision-making, and therefore, “superior” in [PS] and [ES] and the first occurrence of “superior” in [B] mean “more likely to produce desirable results with regards to moral, political and/or other socially important decision-making”, and “superior” in [MS] and [FS] and the second occurrence of “superior” in [B] mean “more capable of making moral, political, and/or other socially important decisions”. For clarity, [B’] substitutes these longer descriptions for the two occurrences of “superior” in [B]:

[B’] If group x thinks in a way that is more likely to produce desirable results with regards to moral, political and/or other socially important decision-making than the way of thinking of group y, then group x is more capable of making moral, political, and/or other socially important decisions than group y.

And similarly, [PS] and [MS] become:

[PS’] Thinking that is focused on and guided by abstract principles (and that is more rational, contractual, and impersonal) is more likely to produce desirable results with regards to moral, political and/or other socially important decision-making than thinking that is focused on and guided by empathy (and that is more emotional, caring, and personal).

[MS’] Therefore, men are more capable of making moral, political, and/or other socially important decisions than women.

Obviously, other interpretations of superiority are possible, but if the kind/context of superiority of ways of thinking deviates too much from the kind/context of superiority of groups, then [B] becomes very implausible. And given the present aim of analyzing the above gender chauvinist arguments, these arguments must be interpreted and reconstructed in their strongest, most plausible forms. [B’] is the most plausible reconstruction of the bridging premise that I could think of.

Let us assume that [B’] is true. Attention then shifts to premises [PS’] and [ES’]. In summary form, [PS’] (given above) claims that principle-based thinking is better in social decision-making than empathic thinking, while [ES’] claims it is the other way around. Assessing the truth of these claims appears to be an empirical matter, although I don’t see any obvious way to test them. Neither claim strikes me as particularly credible, however. If [PS’] were true, then we should put intelligent psychopaths in charge. (Perhaps, we have already done that. If so, then the results suggest that [PS’] is false.) If, on the other hand, [ES’] were true, then we should put bonobos in charge. What seems much more plausible than either [PS’] or [ES’] is
that social decision-making requires both principle-based thinking and empathic thinking – that is, something like the following:

**[CS]** A well-balanced combination of principle-based thinking and empathic thinking is more likely to produce desirable results with regards to moral, political and/or other socially important decision-making than either kind of thinking on its own.

Wherein “principle-based thinking” summarizes the longer phrase “thinking that is focused on and guided by abstract principles (and that is more rational, contractual, and impersonal)” used before, and similarly “empathic thinking” summarizes “thinking that is focused on and guided by empathy (and that is more emotional, caring, and personal)”.

Of course, [CS] is a useless premise in either variety of gender chauvinism presented above, but it suggests two further varieties. These gender chauvinisms replace [MP] and [FE] with [CS] and a claim that one gender is sufficiently capable of (balancing) both kinds of thinking while the other is lacking in one of the two. For example:

**[FC]** Female thinking is a well-balanced combination of principle-based thinking and empathic thinking, but male thinking (which may or may not be more principle-based) is lacking in empathic thinking (and therefore, less well-balanced).

From [FC], [SC], and [B] the same conclusion [FS] follows: women are morally superior to men. (I don’t think a similar argument has ever been made for male superiority, however.)

Although there are differences between gender chauvinism based on [FC] and those based on [MP] and [FE], these different premises are also importantly similar: they assume an essential difference between male and female styles of thinking. Ultimately, all variants of gender chauvinism depend on that assumption. Before we turn our attention to male and female styles of thinking, it is worthwhile to explore the implications of these chauvinisms, however.

3.

If the conclusion of gender chauvinism is true, then men are more suitable for certain kinds of social tasks and occupations, and women for others. If the conclusion of male chauvinism is true, then men should be in charge of governments and businesses; if the conclusion of female chauvinism is true, then women should be in charge. Or so it seems, at least.

It is important to note that in all variants (that is, both those based on [MP] and [FE] and those based on [FC]) women are assumed to be more empathic, caring, and emotional; and men are assumed to be more rational and impersonal. All variants of gender chauvinism take – more or less – these gender differences for granted; they merely differ in which qualities they value higher and/or consider more important (for social decision-making).

Social tasks and occupations can – at least in theory – be ranked by the extent to which they depend on an empathic or caring attitude of the person performing that task. Being the primary care-giver of a child ranks very high on that list. (Usually a mother is the primary
care-giver. Fathers as primary care-givers are relatively rare.) So does being a nurse, or being a childcare worker; and so do a number of other occupations that have traditionally been considered to be appropriate for women. If it is assumed that the number of high-ranking care-requiring tasks and occupations is not much lower than the number of available women – and I don’t think that this is an implausible assumption – then it would be socially preferable that women are mothers, nurses, and so forth first, and only occupy themselves with politics and business (for example) after all care-requiring tasks have been taken care of. Or shorter: if women are better care-givers than men, then women should focus on the tasks that require most care-giving. Of course, it may very well be the case that politics and business also require (or would be improved by) an empathic or caring attitude, but if such attitudes are in short supply, then they should be used where they are needed most first, and that is not in politics and business, but in hospitals, daycare facilities, and at home.

To be clear, I’m not arguing that women should be mothers and nurses and stay out of business and politics. What I am arguing, however, is that this follows from gender chauvinism, regardless of whether that is male or female chauvinism. It is the assumption of differences between men and women with regards to empathy and care (combined with the plausible assumptions that some tasks require more care than others and that care is in short supply) that leads to this conclusion. By implication, it is not just male feminism that holds back gender equality, but female chauvinism as well. Female chauvinism is anti-feminist.

This conclusion shouldn’t come as a surprise. In an unequal social system, any real or supposed difference between the privileged and oppressed groups is more likely to be used to help justify that inequality than counter it (not in the least because the privileged have more means to use it to their advantage). The implications of this should be clear. If the assumed gender differences are real, then women should return to their caring roles. If the assumed gender differences are false, then they are an example of male ideology (in the Marxian sense of “ideology”) corrupting feminism from within. (In that case, this would be one of the most “beautiful” examples of cultural hegemony at work.)

Furthermore, female chauvinism is offensive – not because it claims that women are superior, because that is a meaningless claim (see above), but for the exact same reasons that male chauvinism (or racism) is offensive: it tells some group of people that they are less suitable for certain tasks or occupations on the basis of nothing but their group membership. Male chauvinism is offensive because it tells women that they are less suitable for politics and business and should stick to childcare and cooking dinner for their husbands. Female chauvinism is offensive because it implies the reverse – that is, that men are less suitable as primary care-givers. As a male primary care-giver in a household that has mostly reversed the traditional gender roles, I am deeply offended by the suggestion that the content of my pants makes me somehow less suitable for that role (and thus that we are doing something wrong as a family).

However, if the assumed gender differences underlying gender chauvinism turn out to be true, then all of the above is moot. It makes no sense to be offended by facts, or to claim that facts are “anti-feminist”. So it all boils down to facts, to the facts of gender difference, particularly.
The supposed gender differences are twofold: (1) male thinking is more focused on and guided by abstract principles (and is therefore more rational, contractual, and impersonal) than female thinking, and (2) female thinking is more focused on and guided by empathy (and is therefore more emotional, caring, and personal) than male thinking. This is what is claimed by premises [MP] and [FE], but also by [FC]. The latter claims that women are better at balancing the two styles of thought, but that still implies the same relative difference in focus.

Although this has not yet been made explicit in the above, gender chauvinism does not claim that either men or women are superior due to differences in education or culturally determined differences in circumstances. Rather, the arguments for chauvinism depend on the assumption that these are natural, essential, and/or inherent differences. If men would be superior (in the relevant sense) because they receive a different education from women, that would be a better argument for changing education than for male chauvinism. But if men are superior (in the relevant sense) because of natural (etc.) gender differences, then that could support a male chauvinist conclusion.

There is little reason to believe in such essential or natural differences, however. Naomi Weisstein (1971; 1993), John Dupré (1993, chapter 3), and others have convincingly argued against essentialist understandings of gender. And Janet Shiblet Hyde’s (2005) review of meta-analyses of gender differences shows that there is little evidence for gender differences (aside from physical strength) at all. There is no evidence that male thinking is more principle-based or abstract than female thinking, and certainly no evidence that there would be a natural or essential gender difference in this respect.

Nevertheless, while many may be willing to admit that women are as rational (and irrational) as men, the assumption of differences with regards to empathy and care appear to be more persistent. Maternal care is the stock example “proving” that women care more or deeper than men. But again, even if there is such a difference – and let us assume there is for argument’s sake – then this only supports gender chauvinism (and probably only female chauvinism) if it is a natural or essential difference, and not just a consequence of culturally enforced difference in roles or circumstances. Evidence suggests that this is not the case.

Starting with pregnancy, but continuing after the birth of a child, there are important hormonal changes and structural changes in the mother’s brain, but recent research has shown that similar changes take place in men. Care-giving results in hormonal changes and structural changes of the brain of fathers similar to those of mothers, and provided that the mother and father are sufficiently close, hormonal changes start in fathers already during pregnancy. (For a review of hormonal changes in fathers, see Storey & Ziegler 2016; for a review of structural brain changes in fathers, see Kim et al. 2014.) Some of the most interesting results come from a study by Eyal Abraham and colleagues (2014), who show that hormonal and brain changes in men depend on the intensity of care. What these results suggest is (a) that women are not inherently more caring or empathic than men, and (b) that for women there are two ways to acquire the hormonal changes and structural brain changes to become more caring, pregnancy and being a primary care-giver, while for men there is only one, being a primary care-giver. And importantly, there is no significant difference in the results: male primary care-givers are as caring as female primary care-givers. (But primary
care mothers are more caring than non-primary care fathers, and that remains the standard in most – if not all – societies, thus continuously reinforcing the image of the caring mother.)

In other words, gender chauvinism has things backwards. It is not the case that a more caring attitude makes women better care-givers. Rather, being forced to give more care makes women more caring. (And forcing men to give more care would make men more caring in exactly the same way.)

Therefore, [MP], [FE], and [FC] are false. The supposed natural or essential gender differences are a myth. It is important to realize that this is a self-sustaining myth. It is this myth that forces women to give more care than men, thus making them more caring than men, thus apparently confirming the myth.

5.

If natural or essential gender differences with regards to rationality, empathy, and so forth are a myth – and a damaging myth, moreover, given the inequality it promotes – then an obvious question would be how we can get rid of this myth, or make it less influential at least. This is not the main topic of this short paper, however, so I will only make a brief comment about this.

Given the evidence, the whole idea of inherently male or female styles of thinking makes no sense. There is no male thinking. There is no female thinking. There is just thinking. Thinking can become more principle-based and/or more empathic depending on the circumstances of the thinker (and on the context), but that has nothing inherently to do with gender. (In practice it has a lot to do with gender, however, as forcing men and women in different roles shapes their brains in accordance with those roles.)

Stereotypes of male and female thinking only reinforce gender chauvinism and inequality, and must, therefore, be countered. Unfortunately, such stereotypes are extremely widespread, and not just outside the academy, but in various academic disciplines as well. A famous example is Geert Hofstede’s (1984) ranking of masculine and feminine cultures, which is based on a distinction that largely follows stereotypes of women as more caring and cooperative and men as less caring and more competitive. The cultural dimension is real enough, but the choice of labels is unfortunate.

In this paper I have argued that gender chauvinism – either male chauvinism or female chauvinism – is based on an argument that is fatally flawed because it depends on a false assumption of essential/natural gender difference with regards to thinking styles, rationality, and empathy (or caringness). Moreover, gender chauvinism is not just false, it is offensive and anti-feminist because both male chauvinism and female chauvinism promote a kind of gender inequality that is disadvantageous to women. For that reason, anyone who favors equality of rights and opportunities for men and women (and everyone in between) should fight any kind of gender chauvinism. Unfortunately, this is an uphill battle, as the stereotypes that reinforce the assumption of gender difference are extremely widespread and influential.
references


Weisstein, Naomi (1971), “Psychology Constructs the Female; or The Fantasy Life of the Male Psychologist (With Some Attention to the Fantasies of His Friends, the Male Biologist and the Male Anthropologist)”, Social Education 35.4: 362-73.