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Why Men Need Women

By ADAM GRANT

WHAT makes some men miserly and others generous? What motivated Bill Gates, for example, to make more than \$28 billion in philanthropic gifts while many of his billionaire peers kept relatively tightfisted control over their personal fortunes?

New evidence reveals a surprising answer. The mere presence of female family members — even infants — can be enough to nudge men in the generous direction.

In a [provocative new study](#), the researchers Michael Dahl, Cristian Dezso and David Gaddis Ross examined generosity and what inspires it in wealthy men. Rather than looking at large-scale charitable giving, they looked at why some male chief executives paid their employees more generously than others. The researchers tracked the wages that male chief executives at more than 10,000 Danish companies paid their employees over the course of a decade.

Interestingly, the chief executives paid their employees less after becoming fathers. On average, after chief executives had a child, they paid about \$100 less in annual compensation per employee. To be a good provider, the researchers write, it's all too common for a male chief executive to claim "his firm's resources for himself and his growing family, at the expense of his employees."

But there was a twist. When Professor Dahl's team examined the data more closely, the changes in pay depended on the gender of the child that the chief executives fathered. They reduced wages after having a son, but not after having a daughter.

Daughters apparently soften fathers and evoke more caretaking tendencies. The speculation is that as we brush our daughters' hair and take them to dance classes, we become gentler, more empathetic and more other-oriented.

There are even studies showing that American legislators with daughters [vote more liberally](#); [this is also true](#) of British male voters who have daughters, especially in terms of referendum and policy choices about reproductive rights. "A father takes on some of the preferences of his female offspring," argue the researchers Andrew Oswald at the University of Warwick and Nattavudh Powdthavee, then at the University of York. For male chief executives, this daughter-driven empathy spike may account for more generous impulses toward employees that temper the temptation toward wage cuts.

Is it possible that proximity to infant girls prompts greater generosity? Additional studies, in a variety of fields, suggest this is the case — and that it might extend beyond daughters. Consider, for

example, the [series of studies](#) led by the psychologist Paul Van Lange at the Free University in Amsterdam. To figure out what motivates people to act generously, Professor Van Lange and three colleagues set up a game in which more than 600 people made choices about sharing resources with someone they didn't know and would never meet again. The participants chose between these basic options:

(a) You get \$25 and your partner gets \$10.

(b) You get \$20 and your partner gets \$30.

The first option is the selfish one; you're claiming most of the resources for yourself. The latter option is more generous as it involves sacrificing a small amount (\$5) to increase your partner's gains by a much larger amount (\$20).

The players expressed consistent preferences in each of the nine rounds they played on Professor Van Lange's watch. The data showed that players who made the more generous choices had more siblings. The givers averaged two siblings; the others averaged one and a half siblings. More siblings means more sharing, which seems to predispose people toward giving.

And once again, gender mattered. The givers were 40 percent more likely to have sisters than the people who made more self-serving, competitive choices. (There was no difference in the number of brothers; it was the number of sisters, not siblings, that predicted greater giving.) And Professor Van Lange's team pointed to another study showing that the more sisters a father has, the more time he spends raising his own children. After growing up with sisters, men who have opportunities to give are more likely to do so.

SOCIAL scientists believe that the empathetic, nurturing behaviors of sisters rub off on their brothers. For example, studies led by the psychologist Alice Eagly at Northwestern University [demonstrate](#) that women tend to do more giving and helping in close relationships than men. It might also be that boys feel the impulse — by nature and nurture — to protect their sisters. Indeed, Professor Eagly finds that men are significantly more likely to help women than to help men.

Some of the world's most charitable men acknowledge the inspiration provided by the women in their lives. Twenty years ago, when Bill Gates was on his way to becoming the world's richest man, he rejected advice to set up a charitable foundation. He planned to wait a quarter-century before he started giving his money away, but changed his mind the following year. Just three years later, Mr. Gates ranked third on Fortune's list of the most generous philanthropists in America. In between, he welcomed his first child: a daughter.

Mr. Gates has reflected that two female family members — his mother, Mary, and his wife, Melinda — were major catalysts for his philanthropic surge. Mary "never stopped pressing me to do more for others," Mr. Gates said in a [Harvard commencement speech](#). The turning point came in 1993,

shortly before he and Melinda married. At a wedding event, Mary read a letter aloud that she had written to Melinda about marriage. Her concluding message was reminiscent of the Voltaire (or Spiderman) mantra that great power implies great responsibility: “From those to whom much is given, much is expected.”

Along with guiding much of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s philanthropy, Melinda played a pivotal role in shaping the Giving Pledge. She read a book about a family that sold their home and gave half the proceeds to charity, and began spreading the word about the idea. When Bill Gates and Warren Buffett convened dinners for billionaires to discuss philanthropy, Ms. Gates made sure that wives were invited, too. “Even if he’s the one that made the money, she’s going to be a real gatekeeper,” she [said](#). “And she’s got to go along with any philanthropic plan because it affects her and it affects their kids.”

In a provocative 2007 presentation in San Francisco, the psychologist Roy Baumeister asked, “[Is there anything good about men?](#)” (The short answer, if you haven’t read “[Demonic Males](#),” by Dale Peterson and Richard Wrangham, is not much.) But our saving grace, Professor Baumeister argues, is that across a wide range of attributes, “men go to extremes more than women.” Men are responsible for the lion’s share of the worst acts of aggression and selfishness, but they also engage in some of the most extreme acts of helping and generosity.

On this point, the economists James Andreoni at the University of California, San Diego, and Lise Vesterlund at the University of Pittsburgh [report evidence](#) that whereas many women prefer to share evenly, “men are more likely to be either perfectly selfish or perfectly selfless.” It may be that meaningful contact with women is one of the forces that tilt men toward greater selflessness.

THE warming effect of women on men has important implications for education and work. In schools, we need to think carefully about how we organize children into groups. In 1971, in the wake of Texas school desegregation, Elliot Aronson, a psychologist at the University of California, Santa Cruz, validated a [simple but powerful approach](#) to reducing stereotypes and prejudice.

His core idea was that students would learn to respect and care about one another if they had to rely upon one another when collaborating in small groups toward shared goals. Professor Aronson made each student responsible for teaching the group about a different topic that would be covered on a coming test. It was like working on a jigsaw puzzle: the group needed pieces of information from every member in order to put together the general understanding that would be measured on the test. After the experiment, stereotypes and prejudice fell — the students became significantly less hostile toward one another — and the minority students got better grades.

What would happen if every classroom followed the jigsaw structure, with mixed-gender study groups providing boys with the opportunity to learn from girls? In addition to gaining knowledge, perhaps they would learn something about teaching, helping and caring for others. When some of

those boys grow up to become rich men, they might be less like Scrooge and more like Mr. Gates — or at least less likely to become your wealthy neighbor who refuses to pay his share of the hedge trimming. Or your (not so) great-uncle who always flies first class but sends your kids cheap birthday presents.

At work, we sorely need more women in leadership positions. We already know from considerable research that companies are better off when they have more women in top management roles, especially when it comes to innovation. Professors Dezso and Ross have [recently shown](#) that between 1992 and 2006, when companies introduced women onto their top management teams, they generated an average of 1 percent more economic value, which typically meant more than \$40 million.

We recognize the direct advantages that women as leaders bring to the table, which often include diverse perspectives, collaborative styles, dedication to mentoring and keen understanding of female employees and customers. But we've largely overlooked the beneficial effects that women have on the men around them. Is it possible that when women join top management teams, they encourage male colleagues to treat employees more generously and to share knowledge more freely? Increases in motivation, cooperation, and innovation in companies may be fueled not only by the direct actions of female leaders, but also by their influence on male leaders.

It's often said that behind every great man stands a great woman. In light of the profound influence that women can have on men's generosity, it might be more accurate to say that in front of every great man walks a great woman. If we're wise, we'll follow her lead.

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