Don's diary

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☐ **Tuesday**. Last night was the departmental Christmas party. We finally found a date for it at the end of January! And as the wine flowed at my end of the table debate focused on whether my book, *The Essential Difference*, carried a moral imperative for men to change. One of my colleagues argued that if the average man is liable to cause relationship problems because he's less good at empathising than the average woman, men had better learn better empathy. I didn't much like the sound of this. It feels too controlling, too much like compulsory therapy. Women seem to be less interested in systemising than men, but no one suggests that they should be obliged to improve their skills. Who would fancy compulsory car maintenance? And if we aren't requiring one sex to change, we shouldn't really be requiring it of the other.

My reply was that society has changed so dramatically in the last forty years that men these days are *expected* to be sensitive, caring, communicative and emotionally involved. Fine if you're the kind of man who can do all this, but what if you find these things a huge effort – as hard as some people find maths or physics? We may now have a group of men who need help with empathy. In the past their shortcomings would have been well camouflaged. They could just come home at 7.30, kiss the children goodnight, have a quick supper and retire to their studies to work.

And it's not only marriage that has changed. So have schools. Boys who have trouble working in collaborative groups might have got along fine in old-style classrooms with rows of desks and not much chatting. But empathy is a requirement these days, while systemising is still just optional.

☐ **Wednesday**. Another colleague is feeling a bit sheepish this morning because he can't remember much about the party and thinks he must have been drunk. Interesting how alcohol blunts empathy so that, without realising it, you assert that you're right and the other person is wrong in too black-and-white a fashion. So what is this precious stuff we call empathy? It is a fascinating scientific question, and I'm fortunate that Cambridge is the kind of place where one can bring lots of skills to bear on answering it. Today I spend the morning with geneticists at the Babraham Institute and the afternoon with neuroscientists at Addenbrooke's, all of us collaborating to try to understand the amazing human ability to enter into another person's feelings.

☐ **Thursday**. Another night out. This time a college feast – more alcohol – to welcome the new master of my college. Black tie, gowns, doctors wear scarlet and bonnets, says the invitation. I phone up the Senate House to check up on this medieval regulation. A scholarly-sounding lady gets out the University Statutes and reads out the rules. She tells me that if you got your doctorate in Cambridge, you wear scarlet. And for the installation of the master, if you have a Cambridge doctorate, you wear a bonnet – a wide-brimmed, black-velvet cap with gold tassels. Otherwise, you wear a regular black BA gown. And no bonnet, just a plain mortar board. Apparently my UCL doctorate doesn't count.

Colour-coding doctorates according to their origin is a sensitive issue for me. My relatives were required to wear yellow Stars of David on their clothing during the Nazi era, so I've an extreme view of how colour-coding people can be dangerous.

The feast itself was good because I got to sit between two final-year undergraduates and enjoyed being able to talk across the generations and across disciplines. The new master gave an entertaining speech, arguing that in a competitive world the most important thing a Cambridge college can do to attract students (and their fees) is to hold on to our traditions. But which traditions, I couldn't help wondering. The ones that discriminated against women for generations? The ones that used to discriminate against minorities? Some traditions are beautiful, and some enable terrific creativity and innovation. But one surely wouldn't want to hold on to *all* traditions?

☐ **Friday**. A scramble for the train to King's Cross for a meeting at the National Autistic Society of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism. Practical questions are up for discussion. How can we increase the funding available for basic medical research into autism, for intervention research (to find out what helps) and for services to meet the massive under-provision for families. My colleague on this committee, who has a son with autism herself, tells me that another mother of a child with autism has just committed suicide. It's the side of autism most people never hear about.

The exotic side (*Rain Man*'s talent for memorising facts) or the mysterious side (the child who never talks) are familiar. But imagine the plight of a single mother suffering major depression looking after a child single-handed – a child who barely acknowledges her but is liable to lash out when something unexpected happens. All the many faces of autism need attention.

Another scramble to the station gets me back to Cambridge in time to pick up my own kids from school. I'm lucky in so many ways. As a parent of normally developing children, I can enjoy real, mutual relationships with each of them. Fun, smiles, knowing winks, conversation. What a blessing. As an academic, I can fit parenting into working life by just walking away from the office at 3pm, even if it means catching up with my email and reading at night. Being a parent is just as important to me as scientific research, and I don't feel any need to hide the fact. ■

Simon Baron-Cohen is director of the Autism Research Centre and a fellow of Trinity. The Essential Difference: The Truth About the Male and Female Mind (Penguin, £7.99) *is available to readers in the UK at £6.99, postage paid. Call 01624 836000 and quote 'CAM/Essential'. Offer closes 30 April 2004*