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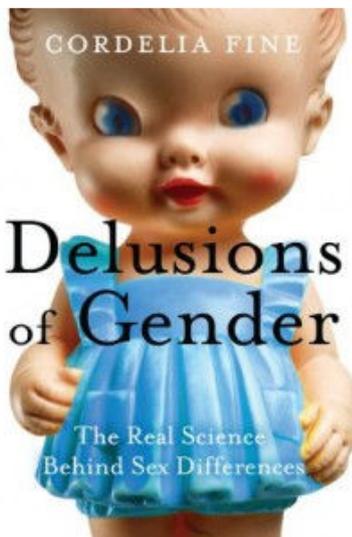
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Here comes the science bit

16th November, 2010 by [Hannah Eiseman-Renyard](#)



I'd only read the introduction to Dr Cordelia Fine's book *Delusions of Gender* (Icon) when I found myself listing people I wanted to make read it at gunpoint: the list began with two exes, and the boss that wouldn't shake hands with women, but within a few minutes included "every teacher, policymaker and year 10 child in the country".

This is a book with such a large scope that it's near-impossible to overestimate its importance. Much like *The Spirit Level* did for socio-economics, this book ropes together decades' worth of studies on gender differences and casts a cool, calm eye (and an arched brow) over them all.

Fine (daughter of *Bill's New Frock* author Anne Fine) begins by framing her argument within the historiography of accepted scientific truths: she quotes some now-hilarious Victorian pronouncements on the innate weakness of women's charmingly delicate minds and bodies to point out just how easily dated most 'common sense' assumptions can be.

Then she points out just how deeply flawed the methods of many gender difference studies have been. Though she does take some obvious, *Bad Science*-esque pleasure in debunking such studies, you'd be hard-pushed not to smirk too at the news that, though one study appeared to show women's brains reacted more than men's when shown images likely to trigger empathy – another scientist found much the same result when they ran the same MRI scan on a dead salmon.

Once a lot of the 'science' has been debunked, the most vocal 'experts' on gender differences appear almost as dubious as creationist scientists. It would be hilarious except that some of these people campaign, off the back of these studies, that these 'innate' and 'scientifically proven' differences mean the genders should be educated separately and differently.

The book also explains the concept of the ‘stereotype threat’ – an impressive array of studies demonstrate that once you have been told you will not be as good at something, your performance suffers. Differences as subtle as ticking a box to indicate your sex at the beginning of the maths test, or gendered décor in the exam room, were shown to have a small-yet-palpable effect on performance when people felt they were up against a negative gender stereotype. If you add up a lifetime of such instances the lack of women in traditionally ‘male’ jobs and vice versa becomes pretty obvious.

Another welcome addition to my vocabulary was the ‘gender fallback’ argument – “when things are so equal now, it must be innate that my little girl loves pink.” However, as Fine argues, with wit and warmth, children are very good at picking up what they ‘should’ do – whether they were instructed deliberately or unconsciously. Studies have shown mothers often overestimate their male toddlers’ physical abilities while underestimating their girls’ – so how can we possibly assume the differences we see are set in stone rather than self-fulfilling societal prophecies?

This book will cast a light on gender assumptions you didn’t know you had, and it’s hilarious – with chapter titles such as ‘We Think, Therefore You Are’ and ‘Sex and Premature Speculation’ Dr Fine is a brilliant tour guide – making light, fun and engaging work of the research. By debunking the rubbish, this book opens up possibilities for a (slightly) clearer vision of the future. Not to be missed.

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