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Who now believes that university risks giving women a moustache?

When women demand equal access to traditionally male roles, theories about their 'natural' unsuitability tend to emerge



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Scientists used to argue higher education would cause women to become 'masculinised' and infertile. Photograph: Chris Ison/PA Wire

Dr Cordelia Fine's new book, [Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society and Neurosexism Create Difference](#), argues against the idea that male and female brains are programmed by nature to provide contrasting talents and skills. Fine's conclusions provide a timely warning against taking too seriously the deluge of books and articles that would have us believe that men are biologically advantaged when it comes to [mathematics, racing driving or map reading](#) – and that women are naturally more intuitive and nurturing, so better at [childcare and multitasking](#) (they can look after a child and clean at the same time). No marks for guessing that "masculine" skills tend to be the ones with status in our particular society.

Gender difference is a thorny issue and historians would be unwise to enter where even some scientists fear to tread. But leaving the merits of scientific evidence aside, history shows that whenever women start to demand equal access to what have traditionally been men's roles, theories about their "natural" unsuitability tend to emerge.

Recently this has ranged from women not being "tough" enough to present Radio 4's Today programme (according to [Ceri Thomas](#), the programme's editor, in March) to reservations about women [lacking the necessary competitiveness](#) for the "red in tooth and claw" worlds of the boardroom or top-flight politics. At a time when women are still challenging the glass ceiling while facing an equality backlash, the popularity of science indicating biological brain differences between the sexes – and from that concluding that women simply can't cut it – comes as little surprise.

Despite its claim to objectivity, science cannot be immune to the anxieties of its day, influenced as it must be by the society within which it is produced. Our fascination with gender difference as resulting from nature rather than nurture was just as strong at the end of the 19th century. That was when the first-wave women's movement began to raise its voice, demanding access to higher education, the professions and the vote. Women's pleas were met with disdain by many scientific and medical men who provided evidence to "prove" that giving in to women's demands was not only a bad idea, but a harmful one, too.

Influenced by Darwin, cutting-edge science pointed to a woman's smaller, less-developed brain and asked if she could be safely trusted with the vote? Women's

subjectivity to her emotions, ordained by her evolution, was yet another question mark over her judgement. And as to higher education, a woman's inability to cope with the intense "brain work", which came naturally to men, was simply a matter of "fact". Eminent doctors such as Sir [Henry Maudsley](#) warned that women would have nervous breakdowns if pushed too far, and were placing themselves in danger of becoming "masculinised" and infertile. There were calls for protective legislation to be introduced for women of the middle classes attending college, analogous to acts that protected women and children working in the mines.

As women made some gains, so a small chorus of dissent grew louder. In their book, [The Evolution of Sex](#), biologist Patrick Geddes and J Arthur Thompson lobbied against higher education and a broader social role for women as "what was decided amongst prehistoric protozoa cannot be annulled by an act of parliament".

The social scientist [Herbert Spencer](#), one of the most influential thinkers of his day, argued that female evolution had stopped "at a stage before man's to preserve vital organs for reproduction". If a woman expended energy on intellectual pursuits, energy would be diverted from her reproductive system and she would become sterile. Because of this "any extensive change in the education of women, with a view to fitting them for business and professions, would be mischievous".

This type of thinking was not new, but the scientific language that cloaked it was. Ideas about sexual difference, specifically women's inferiority to the male benchmark, go back as far as Aristotle and Plato, with the issue waxing and waning since then. In the 19th century, as now, the debate raged. There were fears about women abandoning domesticity to take on "men's roles" and talk of a "crisis in masculinity" as men no longer knew what they were for. [Sound familiar?](#)

Science has proved itself a useful tool in the struggle against change and social issues can easily transmute into "unassailable scientific fact" rather than opinion. Theories that university-educated women may acquire moustaches and the inability to have babies may be discredited now, but I wonder how today's science will look in 100 years' time?

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