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Fighting back against neurosexism

01 September 2010 by [Liz Else](#)
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Book information

Delusions of Gender: The real science behind sex differences by Cordelia Fine
Published by: W. W. Norton/Icon Books
Price: \$25.95/£14.99

Book information

Brain Storm: The flaws in the science of sex differences by Rebecca M. Jordan-Young
Published by: Harvard University Press
Price: \$35/£25.95

Are differences between men and women hard-wired in the brain? Two new books argue that there's no solid scientific evidence for this popular notion

FEW things are more likely to have us all frothing at the mouth than discussions about differences between the sexes - a close companion to race, IQ and climate change in the too-hot-to-talk-about stakes.

Why? Surely in 2010 science should be able to take a lot of the heat out of such an emotive, highly politicised issue. There is, after all, a constant flow of research findings from neuroscientists, endocrinologists, evolutionary researchers and psychologists.

Yet synthesising all this stuff into theories, testing and revising them, going back to the drawing board - it all takes, well, as long as it takes. In the meantime, we must remind ourselves to stay alert to the unintended biases and unexamined assumptions which have a habit of creeping into the best-conducted research or the mind of the best-intentioned reader.

While the science is bedevilled by such problems, should we be calling for a moratorium on popular books about differences between the sexes, as the psychologist Anne Campbell [wondered in these pages](#) two years ago? On balance, no. Two new books, *Delusions of Gender* by [psychologist Cordelia Fine](#) and *Brain Storm* by socio-medical scientist [Rebecca Jordan-Young](#), remind us why sometimes we do need to follow the twists and turns as the ideas develop.

Both authors expect a hard fight against notions that differences between the sexes are hard-wired, which accounts for the gender status quo. Writers who argue for hard-wired brain differences, says Fine, "often like to position themselves as courageous knights, who brave the stifling ideology of political correctness. Yet claims of 'essential differences' between the two sexes simply reflect - and give scientific authority to - what I suspect is... a majority opinion."

She is referring to the fact that many people seem to accept that exposure to sex hormones in the womb hard-wires the fetus's brain in different ways, and so creates essentially different minds. That, according to both Fine and Jordan-Young, is not supported by the evidence - and we need to be told where the many gaps are.

Fine and Jordan-Young have very different ways of setting about out their demolition jobs. Fine is fun, droll yet deeply serious. Setting a cracking pace, *Delusions* tackles the power of implicit association (those unconscious associations we make about men and women) and of negative stereotyping, plus the empathising/systematising theory proposed by psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, and the messy world of brain scans and genetic research. Her conclusion: we are in thrall to "neurosexism". This "reflects and reinforces cultural beliefs about gender - and it may do so in a particularly powerful way. Dubious 'brain facts' about the sexes become part of the cultural lore."

Worrying, but there is worse to come in *Brain Storm*. This is published in Harvard University Press's gender studies list, so the book may not get the profile it deserves. That would be a shame, since Jordan-Young has trawled through more than 300 studies spanning the many research designs used to explore the supposed connections between prenatal exposures to hormones on the one hand, and human sexuality and gender on the other.

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Her conclusion is unequivocal: "the evidence for hormonal sex differentiation of the human brain better resembles a hodgepodge pile than a solid structure... Once we have cleared the rubble, we can begin to build newer, more scientific stories about human development." She has a dry wit too, offering a lovely story about how her mother, with eight children, multiple grandchildren and great-grandchildren, snorted at Jordan-Young's friend who was talking about how different her daughter was from her younger son. "That," her mother said, "is because you only have two."

The evidence for hormonal sex differentiation of the human brain resembles a hodgepodge pile

Back to the drawing board then, and let's see some real scientific correctness this time.

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