

VOICES 
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Sexism dressed up as science

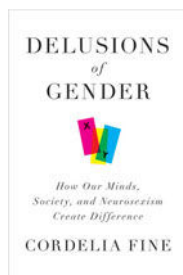
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It would be so easy: The reason men and women are so different — and have such a difficult time communicating — is because they are fundamentally different. At the brain level. Women are “hardwired” for empathy. Men are hardwired to be rational. Women are more intuitive. Men are better at math. It’s science!

And so we have dozens of books on the market to tell us just how different our brains are, and they are packed full of scientific research to prove this. Except Cordelia Fine noticed that a lot of the science backing up these claims is based on problematic research. And a lot of those pop science books — like the very popular “The Female Brain” and “The Male Brain” by Louann Brizendine — have come under attack for using misleading evidence and jumping to conclusions.

Gender is a riddle that we haven’t figured out yet, but perhaps the research into neuroscience of the sexes is much more interesting because of it. I talked to Cordelia Fine about bad science, unconscious sexism and why it’s easier for us to believe that women are just bad at math.

You write that so much of what we believe to be “hardwired” into our brains in regards to gender is really just sexism dressed up as science. How can this be, when science is supposed to be what disproves myths, not helping to create them?



It might be worth saying as a preamble to this question that “[Delusions of Gender](#)” is not an “anti-science” book. Shoddy or careless science contributes to the problem of neurosexism, but good and thoughtful science is part of the solution.

Take, for example, the persistent popular idea that his brain is a waffle (compartmentalized and focused), while hers is spaghetti (diffuse and interconnected). Supposedly, this explains why she’s so much better at multitasking but her emotions cloud her each and every judgment, while his waffle brain makes him more focused and analytic but renders him practically incapable of talking about his emotions. This idea, distantly based on studies of sex differences in language processing, reinforces old stereotypes of men as

thinkers and women as feelers, and is a staple of popular books targeted to parents, educators, spouses and business leaders.

Neuroscience can contribute to this myth when scientists check for sex differences by default, don’t report absence-of-difference, but report, and perhaps make prominent even, marginal differences based on small sample sizes. This is a great way of littering the literature with misleading false positive findings, and popular writers aren’t shy about picking up those findings and running with them. But scientists have also helped to tackle this myth, for example, by statistically pooling the data from all studies investigating sex differences in brain activity while processing language, and finding that the supposed evidence for the more specialized male brain and the more interconnected female brain adds up to a big fat zero.

I was very interested in what you wrote about unconscious sexism, and how it can be more destructive than an outright sexist remark: the constant implication in our culture that boys are better at math and science, versus the teacher coming out and saying it. Can you explain how this works?

This was a speculation I made based on the interesting finding that women attempting difficult math questions seem to be more undermined when their stereotyped inferiority is highlighted only very subtly (or, indeed, just left to fester at its usual background level), compared to more blatant statements. Perhaps the latter trigger a defiant, “Well, I’ll just show *you*” kind of attitude. Another possibility comes from research showing that it helps when people are given something external to the self to which they can attribute their anxiety. (“No wonder I’m feeling anxious, given what a sexist pig this guy clearly is.”) But as a more general point, I think the subtly unconscious sexism compared with the conscious, intentional is harder to deal with because it’s both harder to detect and harder to rail against.

Some might say, well, so what if people believe genders are wired differently, it just means that people have low expectations for women in sciences, or with how empathetic a man can be. But you believe there are real consequences to this scientific line of thought, yes?

These already seem like real consequences to me! Low expectations for women in science means that we stop trying to increase women's numbers there, and we don't continue to try to identify and eliminate the external barriers to their entry and success there. It also means that women tend to have lower expectations of their own abilities and will turn away from those fields. Low expectations for male empathy means that we lower the bar for men in both private and public life, and continue to see caring work as more "natural" to women. In short, it justifies the status quo – a status quo in which politics, science, technology and artistic achievement continue to lie primarily in the hands of men.

These books are so very popular, the books about how the female brain works, how the male brain works, how to communicate as a female brain with a male brain. Why is it something we insist on believing and enjoy reading about?

I think part of the underlying appeal of these books is that they promise to let us off the hook. There's so much gender inequality, and if we can pin it on our different brains then that's a lot of work making things fairer – whether it's within marriage, the educational system, the workplace or politics – that we no longer have to do.

Jessa Crispin is the editor and founder of [Bookslut](#).

Tags: Cordelia Fine, gender bias, Louann Brizendine, men are from mars women are from venus, neurosexism

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