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A brain strained by sexism

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The psychologist and author is working to counter what she sees as dubious scientific claims about differences between males and females.

CORDELIA Fine's son popped into her study one day and looked at all the research material spread out on the floor. There were academic papers and lots of popular books about parenting, including *It's a Baby Boy!* and a companion volume, *It's a Baby Girl!*.

"Why don't they just write one book?" asked Isaac, six at the time. "*It's a Baby!*"

Isaac's suggestion was both reasonable and timely. His mother, a psychologist and author, was busy writing a book refuting the latest "scientific" claims about differences between the sexes. *Delusions of Gender* critiques popular claims that the male and female brains are "hardwired" for difference, showing how myths dressed up in "new scientific finery" perpetuate gender stereotypes.

The titles alone of many popular books are revealing: from *The Female Brain* and *What Could He Be Thinking?* to *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps*. There are claims the male brain is more "compartmentalised" and thus better at focused, analytical thought; that women's brains are hardwired for empathy and that a surge of foetal testosterone "kills off" cells in the communication centres of boys' brains. Yet when we follow the trail of contemporary science, writes Fine, we find "a surprising number of gaps, assumptions, inconsistencies, poor methodologies and leaps of faith" in the studies used to justify such claims.

Meanwhile, dubious "brain facts" become part of cultural lore, used to justify anything from why women do more housework to why maths should be taught differently to boys. While there are differences between the male and female brain (the male brain tends to be larger), they are also remarkably similar. And, importantly, our brains develop in constant interaction with our environment.

So Fine's book also examines the way gender stereotypes, fanned by this contemporary "neurosexism", persist today. Ultimately, she argues, it is our minds, society and neurosexism that "wire" gender. "But the wiring is soft, not hard. It is flexible, malleable and changeable."

Fine, 35, studied psychology at Oxford University and has a PhD in cognitive neuroscience. Her first book, *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives*, was praised by writers such as Alain de Botton and Alexander McCall Smith, as well as academic reviewers. *Delusions of Gender*, described by *New Scientist* as "fun, droll, yet deeply serious", also combines scholarship with a dry wit.

Fine's lineage is both literary and scholarly. Her mother, Anne, a former children's laureate in Britain, has written about 60 children's stories and eight adult novels. Her book *Madame Doubtfire* became a Hollywood film starring Robin Williams. Cordelia Fine's father, Kit, is a professor of philosophy at New York University specialising in metaphysics, logic and philosophy of language. Her sister, Ione, is a vision scientist at the Washington University.

Fine's early childhood was peripatetic. She was born in Toronto, then lived in Michigan, Arizona and California before the family settled in Edinburgh. Her parents split up when she was 12 and her father later returned to America. After studying and working in London, where Fine met her husband, she moved to Melbourne in 2002. "We came here on holiday and we loved Melbourne and we thought we'd try living here," she says. "We had lived in Singapore for a year and I developed a taste for interesting places that are efficient and work quite well. There's a lot going on in Melbourne ... but it wasn't as big and overwhelming and tiring as London."

A senior research associate at Macquarie University, Fine has an office at the Melbourne Business School in Carlton. She is softly spoken, modest and chooses her words carefully when interviewed. In print, she seems more

outspoken.

At one point in *Delusions of Gender*, for instance, she writes: "It is appalling to me that one can, apparently, say whatever drivel one likes about the male and female brain and enjoy the pleasure of seeing it published in a reputable newspaper, changing a school's educational policy or becoming a bestseller."

And last year, in this newspaper, she wrote a magnificently droll column about Brazilian waxing, which began: "Experts estimate that if deforestation continues to increase at current rates, by the year 2037 there will be no female pubic hair left in Australia." That column was savoured by many women I know.

Fine has dedicated *Delusions of Gender* to her mother and I was eager to know what it was like to be raised by a famous author. "I suppose I had that sort of egocentric child's perspective on it," she says. "To me she was not a famous author. She was just mum. One of the things I really admire about my mother is that she has this fantastic career and at the same time I never once felt harmed by that in any way as a child. She was and continues to be a fantastic mother. She's the most perfect combination of traditionally masculine and feminine qualities."

Her mother instilled in Fine a love of reading and the two often talk about writing. Asked about her father's influence on her work, she looks slightly agonised. "I suppose it's the questioning of things ... It's hard to say, without appearing boastful."

Theirs was an intellectual household, with lively dinner-table arguments. "I was always the quiet one - but there was a lot of debate about things with people rushing off to find books and pointing to pages to reinforce their points." She laughs. "I was surprised to find that other families didn't conduct their dinners in the same way. They were talking about the weather."

Fine's favourite of her mother's books is an adult novel, *Taking the Devil's Advice*. According to Anne Fine's website, it's a black comedy about a philosopher, Oliver, who spends the summer with his ex-wife, his children and his ex-gardener (and ex-wife's new husband). Intriguingly, Oliver is described in the blurb as "a philosopher, always happier with abstraction than reality". One critic described the novel as "a brilliantly orchestrated slanging match".

It can be hard juggling work and family and Fine recalls her mother's ability to write whenever she could: while the kids were watching *Play School*, or having swimming lessons. "I suppose I have picked up those qualities as well," she reflects. "When I told a friend about this lovely new office she said, 'Don't forget about all those other offices you've had - next to the balls at IKEA, in play centres.'"

Fine and her husband, Russell, have tried to practise gender-neutral parenting and when their sons (now seven and five) were younger, both parents worked part-time. (In the book, she describes Russell as "a rare jewel".) But three years ago when Isaac was at kindergarten, Fine discovered his teacher reading a book that claimed his brain was incapable of forging the connection between emotion and language. "And so," she explains in *Delusions of Gender*, "I decided to write this book."

The teacher was reading *Why Gender Matters* by US physician Leonard Sax. An influential campaigner for single-sex education, Sax once claimed that the areas of the brain involved in language and fine motor skills mature about six years earlier in girls, while those involved in maths and geometry mature about four years earlier in boys. Fine dismisses such "neurononsense" and quotes American linguistics professor Mark Liberman's description of Sax's use of scientific data as "shockingly careless, tendentious and even dishonest".

What did she say to her son's teacher? "I explained to her that this was not a scientifically valid claim. And she was very responsive to it." The exchange, she says, sparked the teacher's interest in the issue.

Fine is at pains to locate current claims about gender difference within a historical context. In the 17th century, French philosopher Nicolas Malebranche claimed everything abstract was incomprehensible to women because of the "delicacy of brain fibres". In the 19th century, brain scientists claimed women's "intellectual inferiority" stemmed from their smaller, lighter brains. (In fact, brain weight has no correlation with intelligence.) How, she asks us, will current neuroscientific theories stand up in 100 years' time?

Neuroscience, she observes tartly, involves expensive machinery, quantum mechanics and smart-looking 3D images of the brain. Hence it is now seen to outrank psychology in an implicit hierarchy of "scientificness". Dazzled by neuroscience, commentators become blind to "low-tech behavioural evidence of gender equality". And

just because you see a certain response in the brain on an MRI, she cautions, doesn't mean it is "hardwired". It may be a result of learnt behaviour.

Some of the most fascinating material in Fine's book is about how gender stereotypes influence the way we see ourselves. When the environment makes gender salient, she writes, there is a ripple effect on our minds. "We start to think of ourselves in terms of gender, and stereotypes and social expectations become more prominent in the mind ... In other words, the social context influences who you are, how you think and what you do."

One study, for instance, found that women exposed to sexist advertisements were less likely to attempt maths questions in an exam than those who had not seen the ads. It was as if the stereotype of women as airheads dampened their interest in attempting questions that required a coolly logical, "masculine" analysis.

All around us, parents are unconsciously reinforcing gender differences. Research has found that mothers talk more with girl babies and may underestimate their physical prowess. In one study, only two out of 12 boys thought their parents would be happy for them to play with a doll.

Most preschoolers have gendered toy preferences but Fine argues that children are "sophisticated gender theorists". They're sensitive to peer feedback and they see how adults continually draw attention to gender as a way of dividing up the social world.

Then there is the popular culture in which they are immersed. Many children's books and films still suggest males have "a higher status". A study of children's TV programs in 24 countries found only 32 per cent of main characters were female. A survey of top-grossing children's films found less than a third of speaking roles went to females. And an English study of prizewinning and best-selling children's books found males, overall, featured nearly twice as often as females in title roles.

It all comes at a time when marketers are circumscribing "girls" and "boys" toys and clothes as a way of increasing sales. "You have kinders now considering uniforms for children because girls are coming to kinder in clothes they can't play in," observes Fine. "I think that is terribly sad."

She does not pretend to have any easy solutions but thinks talking to children about gender stereotypes can help. She is thrilled that we have a female prime minister. "There was a time when people would have thought that simply impossible." And she feels her own attempts at gender-neutral parenting have made a difference.

Recently, on the way to school, Isaac asked his mother whether other children might regard the story he was reading (*Jennifer's Diary* by Anne Fine), as a girls' book.

"I said, 'They might, it's quite possible,'" Fine says. (The book had a female heroine and a pink cover.) "But it doesn't matter. You are enjoying it and granny would definitely not want someone to say a book was for boys or girls. She would say it was for everyone."

"So he popped the book into his bag and off he went. He's aware that some things are seen as for boys or girls and he knows that to cross those boundaries you might be teased, but he had the confidence and courage to take that risk."

Delusions of Gender is published by Allen & Unwin. RRP \$29.99

Suzy Freeman-Greene is an Age senior writer.

Fine CV

Born: Toronto, 1975.

Education: Experimental psychology degree, Oxford University, master of philosophy (criminology), Cambridge University, PhD University College, London.

Career: Senior research associate, Macquarie University and honorary research fellow University of Melbourne. Author of *A Mind of Its Own* (2005) and *Delusions of Gender*.

Family: Married to Russell, a civil engineer who runs a building business. They have two sons, Isaac, 7, and Oliver, 5.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/a-brain-strained-by-sexism-20100924-15qom.html>