



Neuroscience or 'Neurosexism'? Book claims brain scans sell sexes short

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By [Dan Vergano](#), USA TODAY

DELUSIONS *of* GENDER



*How Our Minds,
Society, and Neurosexism
Create Difference*

CORDELIA FINE

Cordelia Fine

The cover of the book 'Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society and Neurosexism Create Difference.'

If something offers easy answers for not-so-easy questions, you might be reading a popular science book.

Malcom Gladwell's *Outliers: The Story of Success*, centers around the idea of practicing anything for 10,000 hours to be a genius. *SuperFreakonomics: Global Cooling, Patriotic Prostitutes, and Why Suicide Bombers Should Buy Life Insurance* discovers that economics explains terrorism and climate change. suggests evolution explains straying spouses.

And then there's *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society and Neurosexism Create Difference* by Cordelia Fine. A research associate at the Centre for Agency, Values and Ethics at Australia's [Macquarie University](#), Fine turns the popular science book formula on its head.

Chapter-by-chapter, she introduces ideas about the innate differences between the sexes — "it's all fetal hormones" or "men have better-wired brains" or "brain scans show men's brains light up differently" — and then tartly smacks around the studies supposedly supporting them. In particular, Fine joins critics, such as Nikos Logothetis of Germany's Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics, to argue that [brain images constructed from functional magnetic resonance imaging studies](#), often on just a few dozen people at most, have become the latest way to slap a scientific-sounding paint job on old ideas about women being intrinsically dumber than men.

"The main message of the book is that our comforting beliefs about gender — that everything's fair now, that sex inequality should be blamed on

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'hardwired' differences between the sexes, and that our failure to rear unisex children just points the same way — just don't bear up to scrutiny," Fine says, by e-mail. She offers a checklist for readers, "things to bear in mind," when they first see a news story claiming neuroscience has proven some fundamental difference between the sexes:

- How many men and women were in the study?
"Nuisance variables like breathing rate and caffeine intake can influence the imaging signal and give rise to spurious results. This is a particular problem when sample sizes are small, which is often the case in studies that report sex differences."
- Neuroscience is still in its infancy so, "we can only hazard guesses as to what are the psychological implications, if any, of sex differences in the brain."
- Whatever we do or experience creates brain cell activity — "in other words, 'in the brain' doesn't mean 'innate'."
- Fine's Law: "It's guaranteed that, when a later study fails to replicate the result, this will not be reported by the newspaper!"

For centuries, scholars have offered anatomical explanations in support of the belief in those days that women were dumber than men. An English clergyman named [Thomas Gisborne](#) argued in a best seller, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, that women are hard-wired to take care of men, not make decisions. Today, psychologists such as Cambridge University's [Simon Baron-Cohen](#) still claim the female brain is predominantly "hard-wired" for empathy, the male brain for understanding systems. Some education experts claim the "crockus," a brain region that doesn't seem to exist, is larger in boys than girls.

"There are real, and in some cases sizable, sex differences with respect to some cognitive (thinking) abilities," psychologist [Diane Halpern of Claremont \(Calif.\) McKenna College](#) argued in a 2008 Edge Foundation essay. "But we have no reason to expect that complex phenomena like cognitive development have simple answers," she added, arguing that neither brain wiring nor discrimination alone can explain the differences between men and women.

Given the scientific cachet that brain scans now enjoy, though, Fine concludes the pendulum has swung way too far towards the brain-wiring

explanations for differences between boys and girls. "I certainly think there's a real case for saying that researchers need to be a lot more thoughtful about how they investigate gender differences," she says. "I think it's also the case that sexism, so long as it's dressed up in scientific finery, is still socially acceptable."

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