

What psuedo-science has taught us about boys and girls

DELUSIONS of GENDER

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*How Our Minds,
Society, and Neuroscience
Create Difference*
CORDELIA FINE

Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neuroscience Create Difference
By Cordelia Fine,
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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Nationally, women's suffrage was approved in 1920 and since then, countless advancements have allowed women to seek better education, enter prestigious fields of work and earn more money than their grandmothers. But look more closely and many biases still exist. And plenty of popular literature in neuroscience highlights the differences between male and female brains while it downplays the similarities.

Although not as crude as some early 20th century claims — for example, that a woman's smaller brain stem and larger pelvic girdle prevent her suitability for "political initiative or judicial authority" — many modern claims about gender difference prove just as harmful. How will the knowledge that girls fare worse at math influence children just beginning to learn their multiplication tables? Do all boys possess a gene that makes them prefer the color blue? Cordelia Fine's "Delusions of Gender" explores these topics with depth and wit.

The first portion of the book, "Half-Changed World, Half-Changed Minds," addresses, among other things, how the works of some highly regarded authors oversimplify complex gender issues and draw conclusions from shaky research. One such person, Fine believes, is Simon Baron-Cohen, known for his work on sex difference and the male brain.

Baron-Cohen, author of "The Essential Difference," designed a questionnaire intended to measure empathy that contained statements such as "I can easily tell if someone else wants to enter a conversation" and "I really enjoy caring for other people." Each test subject agreed or disagreed, slightly or strongly, with each statement.

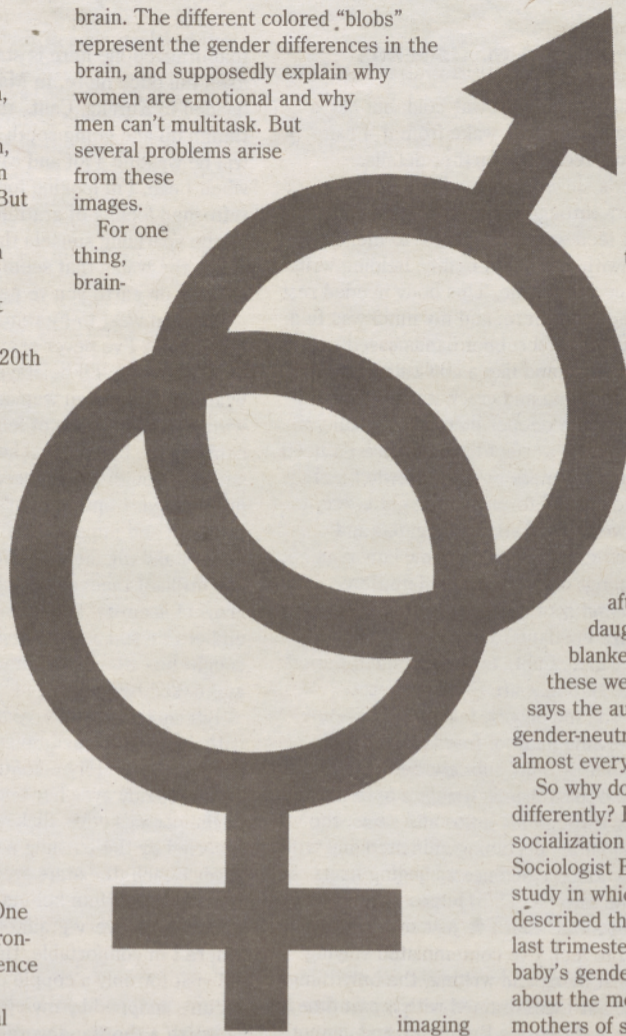
The problem with such studies, Fine says, is the self-rating. Just because someone claims that she's responsive to others' needs or is quick to read emotions doesn't mean that she actually is.

A better way to assess gender, Fine believes, can be found in a study by psychologists Nancy Eisenberg and Randy Lennon which found that gender differences decreased when it was less obvious exactly what was being assessed. When subjects rated themselves, they were more likely to answer in gender-stereotyped ways. In other words: Women display that mysterious "feminine intuition" when they're reminded that they, as women, should possess this power.

But what about brain scans? Often the pictures sit side by side: a male and a female

brain. The different colored "blobs" represent the gender differences in the brain, and supposedly explain why women are emotional and why men can't multitask. But several problems arise from these images.

For one thing, brain-



often imaging studies include only a handful of participants because of high costs. Secondly, the colored patches on any given brain scan don't show brain activity. Perhaps most importantly, brain scans prove difficult to interpret. What does it mean if a portion of a woman's right brain lights up when performing a task, while a man's left brain activates when doing that same action? Much debate still exists over what these colored blobs indicate.

The book cautions against inferring "differences in the mind" from "differences in the brain." And just because the region "lights up" doesn't necessarily mean it's being useful. Fine also discusses the possibility that some structural brain differences actually compensate for physical differences and serve as "alternative pathways to the same end."

Another section of her book, "Recycling Gender," discusses gender neutral parenting and why it often fails. The "gender neutral" part usually involves offering both stereotypical girl and boy toys to a child. Then, when David ends up playing with the

truck and Sarah chooses the doll, parents see biology as the only remaining explanation.

Fine finds more faulty reasoning around gender neutral parenting in "The Female Brain," written by Dr. Louann Brizendine, a book that seeks to explain the neurobiological reasons behind women's behaviors.

In that book, Brizendine recounts an anecdote about one of her study patients who attempted to raise her daughter in a gender neutral way. The woman gave her daughter "many unisex toys, including a bright red fire truck instead of a doll." One afternoon the mother found her daughter cradling the truck in a blanket and calling it "truckie." What these well-meaning parents don't realize, says the author, is that a few stabs at gender-neutral ideas in a world where almost everything is gendered doesn't cut it.

So why do boys and girls behave differently? Fine points to gender socialization that begins in the womb. Sociologist Barbara Rothman conducted a study in which a group of expectant mothers described the movement of the fetus in the last trimester. Mothers unaware of their baby's gender didn't report any pattern about the movement of their babies. But mothers of sons used words like "vigorous" and "strong," whereas the mothers of daughters tended to describe the movements as "not violent" or "not excessively energetic."

And at school, there's even more pressure to conform. Preschool children have been found to play with more gender-appropriate toys when an opposite sex peer is nearby. In other words: Young children tend to reinforce gender stereotypes among themselves.

Fine admits in her "Author's Note" that "it is extremely hard to say anything original about gender." Her aim, she says, is not to "stand on the shoulders of others, but to report the view from the position in an accessible way." The book does, however, present a very refreshing collection of data and facts. When books such as Brizendine's "The Female Brain" populate the bestseller's table at Barnes and Noble, "Delusions of Gender" offers a well-researched and deftly written alternative viewpoint.

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