

The Australian

Theories that men's and women's brains are wired differently are a 'myth', say experts

- Jonathan Leake
- From: **The Sunday Times**
- September 12, 2010 11:28AM

Recommend

48 people recommend this.

11 retweet

THE sexual revolution was not just a struggle for equal rights; women also had science on their side.

A leading neuroscientist has dismissed the “myth” that women's brains are wired differently from men's.

Gina Rippon, professor of cognitive neuroimaging at Aston University, has accused fellow researchers of producing scientific findings that can be used to support the old prejudice that women are not men's intellectual equals.

It follows a spate of bestselling books promoting the idea that there are structural differences between men's and women's brains. They include *The Essential Difference*, by Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of psychiatry at Cambridge, which argues that female brains are better at empathising while men's are wired for analysing the physical world.

A more recent bestseller, *The Female Brain*, by Dr Louann Brizendine, an American academic, reaches similar conclusions and suggests that women spend most of their lives on a psychological “roller coaster” controlled mainly by fluctuating hormone levels.

Professor Rippon sees all such ideas as “patronising nonsense”.

She said: “There is increasing concern within the neuroscience community about the misinterpretation and abuse of our findings on the links between brain structure and behaviour. This 'neurohype' is designed to support stereotypes and to suggest that there is a major biological and structural difference in the brains of men and women that explains their social roles and status.

“This is nonsense. There may be some very small differences between the genders but the similarities are far, far greater.”

Professor Rippon argues that while researchers can now observe the workings of the brain right down to the level of a single neuron, they are still asking questions inspired by the kinds of old-fashioned male-female stereotypes seen in programmes such as *Mad Men*, the television series about a 1960s advertising agency.

“Throughout history, biological explanations have been used as weapons to explain and maintain social differences,” she said.

“In Victorian times scientists suggested women thought with a different part of their brain from men. In the 1950s they came up with the idea that women's 'inferior' thinking was controlled by their hormones. Now the idea is that men and women have different brain structures; but there is no real evidence for any of it.”

In his book Professor Baron-Cohen suggests that the female brain's propensity for understanding others' feelings makes women more suited to caring occupations. He writes: “People with the female brain make the most wonderful counsellors, primary school teachers, nurses, carers, therapists, social workers, mediators, group facilitators or personnel staff.”

Professor Rippon's irritation with such ideas is shared by Cordelia Fine, of Macquarie University in Sydney. In *Delusions of Gender*, published last week, she says Baron-Cohen has produced “a masterpiece of condescension”.

Some of Dr Fine's harshest criticisms are aimed at American authors such as Dr Brizendine. The central idea of her book *The Female Brain* is that women spend most of their lives in thrall to hormones generated by their monthly cycles, the birth of children and other factors. One chapter suggests that “only when the children leave home are the mommy brain circuits finally free”.

Dr Fine says such ideas are direct descendants of those found in *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, in which John Gray suggested, for example, that it was “scientifically proven” that women benefited from housework because it boosted their hormone levels.

She and Professor Rippon say they fear that neuroscience will be used to justify changes in education policy. Such pressures are already developing: in 2008 Vicky Tuck, then headmistress of Cheltenham ladies' college, was quoted as saying single-sex schools should make a comeback as boys' brains worked differently from girls'.

Twenty years ago Dr Anne Moir published the bestselling *Brain Sex: The Real Difference between Men and Women*. She is about to release a new title, *Brain Sex Matters*. She said: “There are key differences between the male and female brain and you don't need to be a brain scientist to see it. On average men prefer to deal with things, whereas females like to deal with people.”

Dr Fine disagrees: “Again and again claims are made that are simply coating old-fashioned stereotypes with a veneer of scientific credibility.”

The Sunday Times

Recommend

48 people recommend this.

11 retweet

Copyright 2010 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).