

So it turns out we're all from Earth after all

Fionola Meredith

Tue, Sep 14, 2010

SMALL PRINT: FROM THE moment Aristotle pronounced woman to be a “misbegotten man”, there has been an abundance of scientific theories claiming to show that men are from Mars – rational, analytical, and with great map-reading skills – and women are from Venus – emotional, intuitive, a bit wobbly at maths and with an abiding fondness for the colour pink. And it’s no different today.

Fuelled by a wave of popular science and self-help books, as well as the rise of evolutionary psychology, it appears to be widely accepted that boys and girls emerge from the womb with differently constructed brains. That’s a view also held by leading scientists such as Simon Baron-Cohen, a professor of psychiatry at Cambridge, who says that “the female brain is predominantly hardwired for empathy. The male brain is predominantly hardwired for understanding and building systems.”

But a number of female scientists, who see this as an insidious form of scientific sexism, are striking back. In a book published in Ireland this week, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society and Neurosexism Create Difference*, American neuroscientist Cordelia Fine insists men and women have very similar brains, and that there is no defining evidence that they are wired differently. Rather, she says, science itself is informed by cultural stereotypes – not to mention “a surprising number of gaps, inconsistencies, poor methodologies and leaps of faith” – that lead to the assumption of innate gender differences. According to Fine, gender is part of our “neural circuitry” but it’s a social phenomenon, a product of our physical and cultural environment, our behaviour and our thoughts, not a biological given.

Speaking this week at the British Science Festival, Gina Rippon, professor of cognitive neuroimaging at Aston University in Birmingham, will also condemn the popular practice of “coating old-fashioned stereotypes with a veneer of scientific credibility”.

Rippon says that the idea of biological destiny has always been used as a weapon to explain and maintain social differences: “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 structure; but there is no real evidence for it.”

The implications are clear – brainwise, if men and women both come from the same planet, biology can’t be used as a convenient excuse for gender inequalities. The upside is that women are free to exercise their prodigious map-reading skills, and there’s nothing stopping men from owning a pink fluffy mobile phone cosy.

© 2010 The Irish Times