

News



Rosamund Urwin

06.09.10

Listen up, gents. Now, I've been told empathy's not your thing. That the male brain switches off at the mere mention of the dreaded "f" word ("feelings"). So I'll do my womanly best to appeal to reason rather than sentiment.

A question first, though. Did you grow up Mowgli-style, cut off from the rest of humanity? Because otherwise I just can't understand the complete incomprehension of others' emotions that scientists with books to sell claim typifies your mind.

That's the thing, boys. Our "female" brains may allegedly make us mathematically challenged with a predisposed passion for pink, but you are patronised by biological determinism too. You are unfairly made to sound psychopathic.

So both sexes should rejoice at Cordelia Fine's new book, *Delusions of Gender*, a vitriolic attack on the sexism masquerading as psychology that is enjoying a renaissance.

She is, admittedly, another scientist with a book to sell. But hers is impeccably researched and bitingly funny – undermining another myth that women aren't much cop at comedy.

Fine debunks the evidence used in a wave of articles to claim that the persistent inequalities between the sexes have their roots in innate differences between "male" and "female" brains. Instead, she argues that the mind is incredibly malleable and heavily influenced by how others perceive us.

As a male-to-female transsexual says: "The more I was treated as a woman, the more woman I became. If I was assumed to be incompetent at reversing cars, oddly incompetent I found myself becoming."

Girls are not born to pick [Disney](#) princess dresses over diggers, nor women to be incapable of matching men in science: these differences are down to society, not sex.

I suspect most of the media won't listen, since they are among the most enthusiastic advocates of the existence of sex-specific brains.

Only last week, one paper declared that girls "may be naturally less inclined to study maths and physics at A-level than boys". But there was nothing "natural" about it. If you read the study, the lead researcher said: "We think it is do with socialisation processes both in and outside schools." Socialisation. Which in the nature versus nurture debate, falls firmly on the nurture side.

Even the left-leaning liberals are at it, though. "We tried to bring our children up in a gender-neutral environment," they say, as their son hacks at their daughter's Bratz doll with scissors. "Boys and girls are just different."

When I protest that my favourite toy growing up was a ThunderCats sword, they add: "You'll change your mind when you have children", before banishing their son outside to climb trees and appeasing their daughter with the promise of a new doll.

They ignore the multitude of other influences that will have invaded their sprogs' malleable minds: at friends' houses, in toy shops, during ads on TV and in the division of labour between Mum and Dad.

The "it's biology, stupid" approach is the ultimate way to protect the status quo. It's genius, really. Of course there shouldn't be more women designing cars: our brains can't cope with mechanics. Not when there's cooking to be done. I suspect in a century, these views will look as ridiculous as the once-common opinion that education shrivels the ovaries.

"Why can't a woman be more like a man?" asked Rex Harrison in *My Fair Lady*. They can be — and vice versa — so long as we let them.



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Reader views (11)

It's always amusing to me how emotional men get when they're told that the stereotypes they're so invested in believing aren't true. And how they obsessively leave comments on any and every blogpost and article that dares state that maybe those stereotypes aren't true. I suggest we call this condition "testeria."

- Daisy, New Hampshire, United States, 07/09/2010 13:20

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Until I hear that there is some startlingly new, previously unknown FACTS rather than "it ain't fair" based theories designed to build up one side of the argument and quietly (or otherwise) ignore other less convenient details then I won't bother plowing through a single perspective, self-justifying book.

I already know that women are intelligent.
 I already know they are often fine thinkers
 I already know they can be knowledgeable (decidedly different from intelligence, by the bye)
 I have worked with and for them for more than 30 years without problem (I'm a nurse)

.....I also know they are different than men in how they think & reason, and in their expectations in given circumstances - by observation and discussion rather than speculation.

Petty sneering comments from the article author notwithstanding - it happens. Get over it.

- Rogan, Irving, 06/09/2010 23:54

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Cordelia Fine is no visionary: she is another psychologist out to make money with a controversial, existentialistic book. She would be better off in a women's studies department writing about victimhood.

Male and female brains are different in various and meaningful ways, and this is the scientific consensus. The first hint is that the male brain has more mass and the neurons in women's brains are closer together. Beyond physical difference, it is clear that the brain doesn't function independently of the body, and responds strongly to the different reproductive hormones in men and women.

If you do read her book, be sure also to read a book with the opposing viewpoint, of which there are many. May I suggest the Simon Baron-Cohen book "The Essential Difference: The Truth about the Male and Female Brain". Professor Baron-Cohen is a well-respected psychologist at Cambridge.

- James Anstruther, London, 06/09/2010 17:48

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Reading all the comments from female readers just makes me wonder how they find the time to get worked up about these things, what with all the housework and cooking to be done.....

- Mark, London, 06/09/2010 17:36

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Obviously some of the commentators have not deigned to read Cordelia Fine's book on the subject of just how our male supremacist society indoctrinates girls and boys into the myth that females and males are from different planets.

The only reason why young women are not entering the fields of maths, chemistry and science is because the media consistently promotes the myth that females are not as good as males at maths, chemistry, science etc. Why do you think companies spend so much money on advertising their products? Because it works and the same applies with the false claims that girls are not as good as boys with regards to studying maths etc. Keep repeating the propaganda and very quickly girls and women will believe these lies.

Read Fine's book to discover the reality - there is no such thing as a female or male brain - but certainly all females and males are subjected to intense media doctriination of what supposedly

passes for objective (read biased) science.

- Jennifer Drew, London, 06/09/2010 15:20

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"The crux of the argument is that designing cars and other male professions is superior to cooking. That argument is stupid and flawed.
- Surfinjo, Hampshire, 06/09/2010 14:10"

With respect Surfinjo, I don't think Rosamund's point is about which profession is "superior". She was just using that as an example of the typical stereotypes attributed to the sexes - boys and their cars, girls in the kitchen, etc.

- Kieran, London, UK, 06/09/2010 14:19

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Women have now been accepted into the professions for over two centuries, perform better in academia than men, have on average far greater spending power than men, and we're meant to believe the reason they aren't leading society is due to sexist men and their mean words and rigid mores?! Modern technology has made it so that anyone with a great idea and enough ambition can be very successful, but still there are virtually no young entrepreneurs (look at the Times Young Rich List - not one self-made woman except through acting or modelling). There are so many obvious physical and not-so-obvious neurological differences between the sexes, present from a very young age - not least because of the massive amount of testosterone the male brain receives in early infancy (10x more than in young girls). Mostly it is pure common sense that men and women evolved to be substantially different and therefore complementary...

Pretending the sexes are similar has been a disaster for modern society and has led to a greatly increased incidence of mental illness, especially in women. I urge you to read about David Reimer, who was born male but brought up believing he was female, partly as a perverse experiment to prove that gender is primarily learnt. It didn't work out well, sadly for him.

- Paul, London, 06/09/2010 14:14

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The crux of the argument is that designing cars and other male professions is superior to cooking.

That argument is stupid and flawed.

- Surfinjo, Hampshire, 06/09/2010 14:10

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Spot on, Rosamund. Speaking as a scientist, I can say that, overall, fewer women choose maths, physics or computer science than men. In biology it's 50-50. Interestingly, this trend is reversed in the field of bioinformatics, as more and more female biologists specialise in computational biology - and very successfully so. Everyone (not only scientists) should read the book 'Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing' from MIT Press. It will change your mind - well, if you are open-minded, that is.

- John, London, 06/09/2010 13:05

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"They ignore the multitude of other influences that will have invaded their sprogs' malleable minds: at friends' houses, in toy shops, during ads on TV and in the division of labour between Mum and Dad."

I think that sums it up.

My opinion is the whole gender-stereotyping starts at birth: A rather simplistic example is that a one-year-old girl isn't old enough to say: "Mum, I want some pink clothes". She will often just get them. Because it's the accepted norm.

"I suspect in a century, these views will look as ridiculous as the once-common opinion that education shrivels the ovaries."

Agree entirely. Look at the progress in the last half century. The expectations for women in particular have changed beyond recognition. I doubt in 1950 that people thought that half a century later women would be out in the pub after work rather than straight home, in managerial positions (albeit not enough), permitted to be single after 30, etc.

Nevertheless sexism (particularly subtle sexism) is still sadly prevalent. The attitude that a woman can't really like football for example. Or that a man should be having obligatory lad-chat at least once a day.

- Kieran, London, UK, 06/09/2010 12:02

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News flash: the differences between men and women are quite real. They are no less real for being caused by "nurture" instead of "nature". In 20,000 years things may be quite different indeed. In the meantime, smart employers and universities should be forgiven for trying to deal with reality.

- Bloke, Lambeth, 06/09/2010 11:45

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