



Every month, we ask a guest contributor from the world of psychology to share their wisdom. This month psychologist **Dr Cordelia Fine** celebrates women's achievements

# The limits of equality



A few months ago Julia Gillard became Australia's first female prime minister. In light of this, it's rather delicious to recall that just a century ago the idea of women even voting was, to many, a fecklessly ill-advised notion. In *The New York Times* in 1915, neurologist Charles Dana argued that examination of the female spinal cord and brain stem suggested that women were ill-equipped for politics.

Margaret Thatcher showed a similar failure of the imagination when she said she didn't think there would be a female prime minister in her lifetime. There are always people who think we've reached the limits of gender equality, and the women who prove them wrong widen the potential scope of life for the next generation.

Alas, while women continue to take giant steps forward, new research shows that shedding our clothes can hamper our efforts. Dr Stephen Loughnan and

colleagues report in the *European Journal Of Social Psychology* that emphasising the body risks obscuring the person. Participants were asked about their impressions of photographed women, with a focus on characteristics that distinguish people from objects. When stripped of their clothing they were also, in the minds of those judging, stripped of competence and entitlement to moral consideration.

Our own bodies can also influence our judgements. A series of experiments reported in *Science* found that tactile experiences affect our impressions of others: CVs that were evaluated on a heavy, rather than light, clipboard were rated as more serious. This intimacy between our minds and our environments is a major theme in my new book, which I'm demanding be inscribed on lead sheet. ■

*'Delusions Of Gender' by Cordelia Fine (Icon Books) is out this month (cordeliafine.com)*

## THIS MONTH CORDELIA HAS BEEN...

### READING

*Requiem For A Species: Why We Resist The Truth About Climate Change* by Clive Hamilton (Earthscan). A terrifying, compelling book about the psychological forces that have led us to the dire situation we now face. Prepare to have comforting strategies of denial stripped bare.

### WATCHING

#### TED Talks

Watch speeches from great names in design, entertainment, arts and technology for free online (rather than for thousands of pounds in person) at [ted.com](http://ted.com). Its 'ideas worth spreading' ethos makes for excellent viewing.

### SURFING

[bbc.co.uk/radio4](http://bbc.co.uk/radio4)

Three cheers for technology – you can live in Australia but still listen to British radio. I tend towards the more cerebral programmes such as *Just A Minute*, but also listen to anything my mother [the children's author Anne Fine] has heard and thinks I will enjoy.