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A Career in Gender? Think Twice

When you write a book about gender, you quickly become immersed in the question of how gender differences impact people's suitability for certain careers. But researching the topic has well-placed me to also offer advice on a topsy-turvy version of that question. What kinds of people are best suited to a career discussing gender differences?

When it comes to the job of arguing that it's time for us all to face up to the simple fact that men and women's brains are hardwired differently, and gender equality is a futile dream, I've come to the view that the trait that will take you furthest is total confidence. For sadly, despite the best efforts of careful and thoughtful feminist neuroscientists, the primary occupational hazard associated with this role is that your claims about why the sexes can never be equal will be proved horribly and embarrassingly wrong.

My personal favorite from this category is probably the suggestion, made by neurologist Dr Charles Dana, that sex differences in the spinal cord and brain stem indicate a need to think carefully about the wisdom of giving women the vote. But the competition for a placing in the Hall of Shame is stiff, because for as long as there has been brain science there have been erroneous neurological explanations and justifications of sex inequality. Again and again, these hypotheses find themselves hurled onto the scrap-heap of scientific history. And while it's true that neuroscientific techniques and knowledge have advanced enormously since the days when placing a brain on a weighing scale was considered cutting edge, the brain is still, as Anne Fausto-Sterling put it, "a vast unknown".

We don't, for example, know whether differences reported in new neuroimaging studies will withstand the tests of replication or better methodologies. (Certainly the most influential claim - that the male brain is more "specialized" in its organization than the female one - has repeatedly failed such tests). We also don't really know what to make of any brain differences that we do find - even assuming that these are reliable. It's currently anyone's guess what greater brain activity in the left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, or a slightly larger amygdala, actually means for how women and men think or behave. It therefore takes a very special kind of professional courage to remain unfazed by the increasing likelihood that today's neurological explanations of inequality will wind up, along with all those from history, out there on that scrap-heap.

Adept language skills are also helpful for this career. Just how compellingly can you call for society to be adult enough to separate politics from science, condemn the political correctness that denies the scientific truth of sex differences, or express your deep regret that the data don't support your own egalitarian preference? After all, the more convincing your rhetoric, the less likely it is that

someone will take a closer look at the evidence on which your claims of hardwired differences are based - and so maybe discover poorly done, over-interpreted, or misinterpreted science. Perhaps even no science at all.

Finally, a strong degree of eagerness will help you a good deal in this job. Ideally, you'll be among the first to declare the experiment in equal opportunity completed, and a failure. You'll be the most impatient to conclude that any stalling in progress towards greater equality means that the natural limits have been reached.

If none of this describes you but you're still really interested in a career in gender, there is still hope. Although generally not as well-paid, there's also a demand for people interested in taking a closer look at popular claims about hardwired differences. I should warn you, however, that there is an occupational hazard associated with this job too. People whose blood pressure is already high should reconsider their interest. And my own experience of writing *Delusions of Gender* has led me to believe that certain other qualities are no less important than a sturdy cardiological constitution. What will stand you in good stead? A healthy appreciation of irony. Enough imagination to contemplate the possibility that gender inequality might diminish as much over this century as it did during the last. And an unflaggingly optimistic belief that, eventually, people will stop carelessly hurling out ideas destined for that ancient, sorry scrap-heap.

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