



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

September 3, 2010

Boys are from Mars and girls from Venus? Not so fast

By Sarah Hampson
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

*A Q&A with Cordelia Fine, author of the new book *Delusions of Gender**

Admit it. Some of the popular books about how the difference between the genders is hard-wired in the brain have made the act of writing that huge cheque to a private single-sex school for your son or daughter a little easier. Such definitive science eases the financial pain. If their brains are made differently, then boys and girls need different educational strategies, right?

Sorry, but the explanation as to why females are good at some things (multitasking, intuition and empathy) and males at others (science, engineering and fixing your computer) is not so easy.

In her new book, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*, Australian psychologist Cordelia Fine invites her readers into a passionate, insightful and often funny discussion about how gender identity is all in the mind, not the brain; in the software, not the hardware, if you will.

"Debunks" may be too friendly a word for what she does to the popular brain science of gender. Rather, she vehemently attacks it. It's not our innate differences that make men from Mars and women from Venus, but the ways we're influenced through gender stereotypes. Those societal messages may not be as overt and intentional as they once were, but they still affect the way girls and boys (as well as men and women) think about who they are and how they should lead their lives.

Ms. Fine, 35, had an e-mail exchange with The Globe and Mail from her home in Melbourne, where she lives with her husband of nine years and two sons, aged 7 and 5.

You are clearly irked about the way neuroscientific discoveries have been marshalled to explain gender differences in such books as Susan Pinker's *Sexual Paradox* and Louann Brizendine's popular *The Female Brain*. Why are we so enamoured of these scientific explanations for gender identity?

One is that neuroscience rates higher than psychology on "scientificness," which may be why it's so easy to overlook all the behavioural evidence of gender similarity, or the context-dependent nature of gender difference, in the face of a single finding of a sex difference in the brain. But also, I think these kinds of explanations let us off the hook. We can stop looking to ourselves and society to explain gender inequality, and instead pin it on hard-wired brain differences.

You seem particularly incensed about Ms. Brizendine's book. Did you see that as a setback for girls and women? Would it be fair to say that the neuroscience of the past 10 years or so has failed us as a society in regard to our understanding of gender differences? You even call it "neurosexism."

I certainly wouldn't classify all neuroscientific research into gender differences as neurosexism. I think it's an interesting question to what extent neuroscience can currently contribute to our understanding of gender differences, given how early on we are in the journey of understanding how the brain enables the mind. But we already know that gender differences vary by social context, by place, by historical period, etc. If we're hoping to find all the answers in the brain, we will definitely be disappointed.

The influence of neuroscientific theory on single-sex educational initiatives comes under great criticism in your book. Why is something that education specialists use to create a better environment for boys and girls so damaging?

There are two problems with the way commentators draw on findings of sex differences in the brain to "inform" educational practices. First of all, reports of sex differences in the brain pop up all the time in the neuroscientific literature. But there are lots of good scientific reasons to worry about whether any one finding of a sex difference in the brain will withstand the tests of time, of bigger samples and of better methodologies. So you may have commentators recommending educational strategies on the basis of completely spurious findings of sex differences in the brain. The next problem is what to make of those differences (even assuming that they're reliable). We're a long way from being able to translate brain differences - a slightly bigger bit of the brain here, or a bit more neural activity there - into educational strategies. This is where gender stereotypes come in handy - and now you've got just about everything you need for a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But you're not against single-sex education, right?

I'm not against single-sex education per se.

Your husband, Russel, comes across as a very involved parent. Have you achieved the Holy Grail of the egalitarian marriage with no gender roles?

Not quite! But we certainly seem to have come a lot closer than just about everyone else we know. There have been a lot of spreadsheets involved, though, getting there.

How has your parenting influenced gender expectations for your sons?

I just don't know. One thing we noticed though is that both our children, especially when they were younger, would use "Mummy" and "Daddy" pretty interchangeably (and none of our friends reported this happening). So who knows, perhaps they haven't developed quite such strong unconscious gendered expectations of what mummies and daddies do. And maybe if and when they become parents themselves, they won't need quite so many spreadsheets.

Would you send them to single-sex schools?

We don't have any plans to.

And what if you had a girl?

Not sure. It's hard enough working out the right thing to do for real children, never mind hypothetical ones!

This e-mail exchange has been edited for clarity and length.

Sarah Hampson is a Globe and Mail reporter and columnist.

CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc



CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.

You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425?icx_id=icopyright/?artid=1695963 into any web browser. CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc and Globe and Mail logos are registered trademarks of CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc. The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.