

Jezebel

5 Myths About The Female Brain



Cordelia Fine's thorough (and funny!) *Delusions of Gender* punches a giant hole in the idea that women's brains are somehow "hardwired" for nurturing and domesticity. After the jump, five ladybrain myths Fine handily busts.

Women's brains make them better at multi-tasking.

By Anna North

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One of the most popular factoids about the ladybrain (something even I, with my limited neuroscience expertise, thought I Knew) is that the corpus callosum, which connects the brain's two hemispheres, is thicker in women than in men. This supposedly allows more "cross-talk," which in turn allegedly makes women better at doing several things at once, like feeling and talking, cooking a steak and tossing a salad (one scientist's example), or nurturing a family while also keeping a home spotless and being perfectly coiffed. However, at least where language processing is concerned, the ladybrain actually shows no more cross-talk than the dudebrain. And, more damningly, women's corpora callosa (Latin: still good for something after all these years) *aren't even bigger than men's*. According to Fine, early studies simply overgeneralized from small sample sizes.

Women are "wired to empathize."

In her book *The Female Brain*, Louann Brizendine claims women are especially good at "emotional mirroring" and "experie[n]c[ing] the pain of another person." And the idea that women's brains make them more "intuitive" than men crops up everywhere from *LiveScience* to *Cosmo*. But Fine points out that one of the studies Brizendine used to claim that women are more empathetic than men actually *only* involved women, while another actually showed both men and women responding empathetically. And when Fine followed up on Brizendine's assertion that women's supposed empathy advantage might be caused by a greater number of "mirror neurons," the very neuroscientist whom Brizendine cited said, "to the contrary, I have looked at many of my studies and have not found evidence for better mirror neuron functioning in females."

Women are bad at math.

Ah, this one. We've all heard the claim that women are simply worse than men at computational activities, which explains why there aren't more ladies in science, math,

and engineering. If we've done a little reading over the past few years, we probably also know that just exposing people to stereotypes like this one actually makes them perform worse on tests. But Fine also adds some interesting new ammo against this theory. She cites one study showing that boys were likely to rate their own math abilities more highly than girls, even if their test scores were the same (could this be because they're continually told girls suck at math?) — and wouldn't you know, "the higher a boy or girl rates his or her mathematical competence, the more likely it is that he or she will head down a path toward a career in science, math, or engineering." Fine notes, too, that in countries where women *aren't* thought to be inferior at math, girls are much better represented in high-level math competitions. And interestingly, she points out that in order to succeed in math in places where it's still male-dominated, women sometimes feel they must "turn away from being female." In one study, women who read an article claiming boys were better at math "identified less with female characteristics regarded as a liability in quantitative domains." Fine explains,

Parts of their identity were being hurled overboard in an attempt to remain afloat in male-dominated waters. If these are particularly cherished parts of the self-concept that must be abandoned then, in the end, the woman may prefer for the boat to sink.

Girls "naturally" love dolls; boys are born lusting after trucks.

Larry Summers gave voice to this particular myth in his infamous women-in-science [speech](#), saying, "I guess my experience with my two and a half year old twin daughters who were not given dolls and who were given trucks, and found themselves saying to each other, look, daddy truck is carrying the baby truck, tells me something." Actually, it shouldn't. Fine notes that her sons also "tucked trucks into pretend beds and, yes, called them Daddy, Mommy, and Baby." More broadly, she points out that children are subject to gender stereotyping *before they are even born* — the way mothers talk about their fetuses differs by gender — and when they *are* born they enter "a world in which gender is continually emphasized through conventions of dress, appearance, language, color, segregation, and symbols. Everything around the child indicates that whether one is male or female is a matter of great importance." Fine concedes that there are some differences in how even the youngest children play, but these grow greater as children get older, and may be greatly influenced by kids' desire — revealed in numerous studies — to do things that are socially constructed as either "for boys" or "for girls." So it's not necessarily that girls hate things that move and love things that need putting to bed — rather, each gender gets lots and lots of implicit and explicit pressure to do gender-appropriate things. To see how important gender-appropriateness, as opposed to actual characteristics, are to children's toy choices, consider this study:

[R]esearchers transformed a pastel "My Little Pony" by shaving the mane (a soft "girlish" feature), painting it black (a "tough" color), and adding spiky teeth (for an aggressive demeanor). Both boys and girls classified the altered pony as a boy's toy, and most of the boys (but not the girls) were extremely interested in obtaining one.

Talking about sex differences in the brain is risky and taboo.

Perhaps one of the most annoying aspects of the empathetic-math-hating-ladybrain theory is the often accompanying claim that its adherents are somehow speaking truth to power, or that they're underdogs against the mighty forces of feminism and political correctness. Fine neatly dispatches this claim:

Some commentators declare themselves to be courageous taboo-breakers, who shout the scientific truth about sex differences into the hushed silence demanded by political correctness. But this is exactly how they shouldn't be regarded. For one thing, neurosexism is so popular, so mainstream, that I think it is difficult to argue that our attitude toward the supposedly unmentionable idea of innate sex differences is usually anything other than casual and forgiving. [...] But also, to those interested in gender equality there is nothing at all frightening about good science.

Fine offers persuasive proof that many of the claims we commonly swallow about male and female brains are based on very bad science indeed. Her entire book — which tackles many more myths I didn't even get into here — is worth a read, and perhaps should be taught in high school and college science classes. Maybe if young women were exposed to the truth about their brains, they'd no longer feel like they had to chuck their gender overboard in order to pursue their dreams.

[Delusions Of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, And Neurosexism Create Difference](#)
[Amazon]

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