

BOOK REVIEWS

DELUSIONS OF GENDER Cordelia Fine

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Reviewed by Kaz Pasiecznik

Cordelia Fine's first book, the highly acclaimed *A Mind of Its Own*, had as a general theme the foundation-shaking notion that you hitherto haven't had nearly as much control over your opinions as you thought. In *Delusions of Gender*, she turns this scholarly bulldozer on scientific claims of inherent differences between female and male cognitive abilities.

Fine examines, in scrupulous detail, many published studies claiming to have found physical differences between male and female brains, and presents a strong case challenging each of them. In contrast to other pop-neuroscience books, her format is not to begin with a 'Psychology 101' chapter, but instead to explain methodologies and concepts (for example, statistical p values, and stereotype threat) when they crop up in her discussion. This refreshing approach makes *Delusions of Gender* accessible to the much wider audience merited by a book this hard-hitting.

Fine's discussion is about much more than just neuroscientific studies of gender differences – for starters, it contains an excellent introduction to the scientific method in general. The style is reminiscent of Ben Goldacre's *Bad Science*; at times sardonic, at others fantastically funny. Perhaps mindful of preaching only to the converted, Fine cleverly presents most of her vast quantity of evidence in a humbler, non-directive manner, allowing the reader to come to their own mind-opening conclusions. *Delusions of Gender* also touches on major contemporary areas of debate within cognition and brain science, such as the validity of imaging techniques to map cognitive functions in the brain, and the extent to which the brain is hard- vs. soft-wired.

As well as neuroscience and psychology, this book would not be out of place in social science and culture studies libraries. Fine digs deep for the roots of gender stereotypes and oppressive inequality, quoting texts from 1900 onwards. A sprinkling of primary sources of sexism against women is enough to remind the reader why the message is so important.

Delusions of Gender looks not only at the cultural history of gender bias, but also its influence on the developmental process of the impressionable human, from foetus to teenager. From children's book characters to tick-boxes on forms (which nearly always list 'Male' first),

it is surprising how insidious and pervasive gender stereotyping can be. Fine's notion of "half-changed minds" describes how egalitarianism has won only the battle against explicit bias, leaving unchallenged the darker force of implicit prejudice – opinions you may deny having, yet which are robustly inherited by your children.

Fine's discussion is for those with an ability to reason for themselves rather than be told the answers; you might like to consider having a cup of coffee to hand whilst reading. With what must be almost a quarter of the book taken up by footnotes and the lengthy bibliography, this isn't a text to be wolfed down in a weekend. But, once you've nibbled your way to the end, prepare to be a relative expert on the subject, and to consider dressing your son in pink and naming your daughter John.

Fine herself notes that it's hard to convince anyone that there is much new to say about gender, but she has met that challenge, bringing the paradigm shift of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* to the scientifically-minded audience of the 21st century. Not for the scientifically or politically faint-hearted, this important message is nonetheless delivered in an accessible and enjoyable way.

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Delusions of Gender (ISBN 978-184831-220-3) by Dr Cordelia Fine is available, in paperback, for just £6.99 (RRP £8.99) + FREE P&P (UK only) by calling TBS on 01206 255800 and quoting *Delusions of Gender* offer.

