

## **Delusions of Gender**

In her new book, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*, Cordelia Fine argues that, far from supporting the existence of vastly different male and female brains, much of the research on the topic is not only deeply flawed, but dangerously misleading. Women aren't worse at math, and girls' preference for girlish toys probably has more to do with social expectations than what's in their skulls. The web site Salon recently interviewed Fine and here are a few excerpts:

### ***Why are people so intent on misrepresenting the differences between the male and female brain?***

We look around in our society, and we want to explain whatever state of sex inequality we have. It's more comfortable to attribute it to some internal difference between men and women than the idea that there must be something very unjust about our society. As long as there has been brain science, there have been misguided explanations and justification for sex and inequality — that women's skulls are the wrong shape, that their brains are too small, that their heads are too unspecialized. It was once very cutting-edge to put a brain on a scale, and now we have cutting-edge research that is genuinely sophisticated and exciting, but we're still very much at the beginning of our journey of understanding how our brain creates the mind.

### ***So women aren't really more receptive than men to other people's emotions?***

There is a very common social perception that women are better at understanding other people's thoughts and feelings. When you look at one of the most realistic tests of mind reading, you find that men and women are just as good at getting what their interaction partners were thinking and feeling. It even surprised the researchers. They went on to discover that once you make gender salient, when you test these abilities [like having subjects check a box identifying their sex before a test], you have this self-fulfilling effect. The idea that women are better at mind reading might be true in the sense that our environments often remind women they should be good at it and remind men they should be bad at it. But that doesn't mean that men are worse at this kind of ability.

### ***Parents who try to raise children in gender-neutral environments are often horrified when, despite their best intentions, their daughters are drawn to Barbies and their sons are drawn to violent toys. If there are no hard-wired differences between the sexes, why does this happen?***

I spend a lot of time with parents, and you see egalitarian-minded parents try hard to rear their children in a non-gendered way. Then you see their children defy them. The fact is, babies are born into a world in which sex is the most important and obvious social division. It's constantly emphasized through segregation, through dress, and so forth. Babies are born to parents who have a host of assumptions and expectations about gender, whether or not they consciously endorse those expectations. Studies have shown that parents have a tendency to see boys as more boyish and girls as more girlish than they actually are.

Once the children reach the age of 2, the age they discover which side of this gender divide they're on, all bets are off. Parents may prefer that girls not play with Barbies and boys not play with guns, but by that age children know what tribe they belong to, and will want to be part of it.

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