

Fine, C. (2010). *Delusions of gender: The real science behind sex differences*. London: Icon Books, 338 pages.

Reviewed by  
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Many accounts of gender differences would have us believe that there are key differences between men and women's brains and abilities and that these differences are a result of genetic hard-wiring. These fixed differences are asserted in popular literature (e.g., John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, Allan and Barbara Pease's *Why Men Don't Listen and Women Can't Read Maps*, Barbara and Allan Pease's *Why Men Don't Have a Clue and Women Always Need More Shoes*<sup>1</sup>, Michael Gurian's *What Could He Be Thinking?* and Leonard Sax's *Why Gender Matters*) as well as reinforced by some eminent academics (e.g., Simon Baron-Cohen, Louann Brizendine). This biological explanation has gained legitimacy because of their appeal to the need for 'facts' and physical explanations. Scarily, this notion of hard-wired differences between boys and girls has infiltrated the curriculum and teaching methods in many schools. Indeed, Fine writes, "Three years ago, I discovered my son's kindergarten teacher reading a book that claimed his brain was incapable of forging the connection between emotion and language. And so I decided to write this book" (p. 274).

Fine provides a compelling and meticulously-researched argument to show that the wiring is soft – a product of culture – rather than hard. The book consists of three parts. Part 1, 'Half-changed World', Half-changed Minds, consists of eight chapters devoted to dispelling the myth that differences between male and female brains can only be the result of hard-wiring. Instead, she provides evidence for sociocultural factors that affect our brains, thoughts, emotions, and behaviours.

Part 2, Neurosexism, contains eight chapters that challenge the pseudoscience that is based upon misinterpretations and misrepresentations of brain imaging studies. Fine demonstrates how these dubious conclusions based upon knowledge gaps, assumptions, and flawed methodologies are legitimated and used to sustain sex discrimination as the status quo. After all, if gender differences are hard-wired, we have no reason to question the unequal access to education and employment, sex discrimination, or domestic inequalities; these can be legitimated by this (pseudo)science.

Part 3, Recycling Gender, comprises five chapters highlighting how children are 'gendered' even before their conception and throughout their development. Fine highlights the *increasing* saliency of gender in Western cultures and asks "how should children ignore gender when they continually watch it, hear it, see it; are clothed in it, sleep in it, eat off it?" (p. 239). Given this saliency, Fine shows that attempts to engage in gender-neutral parenting are laudable yet laughable. It is no wonder, then, that parents are quick to (wrongly) conclude that differences between their sons and daughters can only be a result of biology.

This book certainly appealed to me as a woman, psychologist, academic, and parent of two daughters. At times, Fine is refreshingly amusing in her painstaking research, such as when she describes following up on the references cited in the neuropsychiatrist-authored book *The Female Brain* (Brizendine, 2007). She writes, "I tracked down every neuroscience study cited by Brizendine as evidence for female superiority in mind reading. (No, really, no need to thank me. I do this sort of thing for pleasure)" (p. 158). However, the book is not perfect. The writing varies from conversational and accessible to unnecessarily opaque leading me to wonder about the audience the book is intended for. Presumably to appease an international readership, Fine sometimes uses North American examples (e.g., New Yorker and Hispanic-American when

describing social identities) and language (e.g., barrettes), and this is jarring to me as an Australian reader of an Australian author. Additionally, Fine declares, “Anecdotes are not data” (p. 55), yet paradoxically, intersperses the summaries of experimental findings with anecdotes of her family life and children as well as other researchers’ case studies. Finally, I think the lack of any discussion of Gender Identity Disorder and its implications is an oversight, and would have strengthened the thesis by providing another example wherein hardwiring versus sociocultural constructions of gender could be examined.

On the whole, the book is useful to community psychologists because it provides a challenge to the dominant discourse explaining gender differences and should be of particular interest to parents and teachers.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> I am not making these up.

#### References

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