

Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference

Author: Cordelia Fine, 2010,
Published by W. W. Norton & Company

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This book is an alternative to the vast literature that aims to show us why women are from Venus and men are from Mars. As pretensions it might sound, I consider this book to be a must read for everybody, not only for academics or researchers. Gender myth perpetuation can be in some proportion stopped by educating people about the various biases that can interfere with the outcome of studies on sex and gender, and the factors that can favor or inhibit their popularization outside academia, which could, in the long run, lead to a discrediting or at least a critical reception of the wealth of pseudo-scientific claims of biologically inherent differences in the psychological and social construction of men and women.

Emphasis in writings that explain that there are hard-wired differences between men and women is placed upon the fine-tuned emotional skills of women, as opposed to their emotionally helpless male counterpart, to sugarcoat the inherently misogynistic message at the core of these studies: it is due to the very nature of our species that women are underrepresented in the hard sciences and mathematics, in leadership etc., not due to historical systemic oppression. While the history of sexism is not explicitly denied, it is provided with an implicit excuse in an appeal to nature, and the active role of excluding women from the political, economic and academic spheres is thus minimized, and passed off as being in a large part due to women being, on average, naturally deficient in the necessary skills required to be involved in these activities.

This is steeped in the benevolent sexism of the 18th and 19th centuries (Laqueur, 1990), in which women were recast, in a euphemistic twist, as complementary to men instead of outright inferior to them, where the woman's empathy and caring, maternal, nature complemented the man's colder, more rational and competitive nature. What followed was the naturalization of gender restrictions and of the sexual division of labor,

on a supposedly scientific basis instead of on tradition or theology. The current trend, aptly recognized as neurosexism by Fine, is in no way new to recent scientific history. At the beginning of the 20th century theories on the complete biological difference between the male and female body, and its corresponding psychological and social difference, were still in circulation. One example is Geddes' theory on the male body being composed of a cellular type designed to release energy – catabolic cells – and the female body being composed of energy-conserving cells – anabolic cells (Laqueur, 1990).

Scientific progress within the last century dispelled these ideas, however the overall outlook simply latched on to newer findings: the chromosomal difference between sexes and differences in standard hormone levels were used to justify what was considered to be the natural state-of-things. Using recent neuroimaging technologies, faulty statistical methodology and unquestioned biased presuppositions on how the findings were to be interpreted, entirely new fields of research were developed, based on the continuous project to naturalize gender differences. Thus a whole range of methods and scientific notions crossed over from biology and medical science, where they fitted with the concrete factual data, into the social sciences, where they were used to consistently recast social constructs as biological hard-facts.

This would be the core of Fine's criticism. To look at gender differences in isolation through a scanner can only give an incomplete and one-sided image of the different manifestations of a complex phenomenon such as gender, and of the possible causes that produce the various elements that together constitute gender, a fact which any person with a sociological background can approve of. Fine, however, presents her work as a scientific critique, which fits with her background as a neuroscientist. Her goal is not to minimise the importance of scientific studies from a cultural relativistic point of view, but to impose rigour. This also sets the limitations of her study, that only touches upon the historical, economic, political and sociological aspects of studies on gender differences, focusing on an internal scientific critique.

The amount of studies the author analyzes is impressive, giving the impression that she expected criticism, and thus took steps to prevent any simplistic appeal to material that the book overlooks, as well as insure a sufficiently vast sample to prove her point. The book supplements this critique with a wealth of information aimed at deconstructing gender myths, which helps develop its central ideas, and makes for a more pleasant read." ?For example, the fact that in the beginning of the programming

era, women dominated this field and were slowly removed by jobs interviews that promoted men abilities (for example by testing for personality traits that favored men).

We cannot read this book without thinking of medical theories on the wondering uterus and hysteria that were so popular in recent history. We can see that a lot has changed, as accumulated data has disproven these theoretical claims time and time again, but the general pseudo-scientific trend finds a way of coming back into the mainstream, in different forms, consistent with the popular field of study of the day. The strategy, used also in the case of neuroscience, is to take a relatively new field of research or methodology and latch on to it, developing a parasitic sub-trend within the field that produces enough specialists and research to lock itself in a self-legitimizing circle. Because the field lacks an institutional tradition that can adequately produce internal criticism, it's relatively easy for trends that come to confirm "common wisdom" to champion them as scientific breakthroughs, drawing new researchers to the field, while defending their results from outside criticism by invoking the lack of qualifications of their critics.

This is why Fine's "insider" status is invaluable to the strength that her critique has over the non-specialist reader, although, as we mentioned, the sometimes overwhelming amount of material she provides us with blocks any attempt to accuse her of using her authority as a neuroscientist in lieu of an argument. Her position also puts us on guard against simplistically assimilating the object and method of a discipline like neuroscience, with certain prejudices that have been nesting within the field. This would simply legitimize the proponents of reinforcing the status-quo through scientific research, as accurate representatives of the field. Instead we should recognize these sexist interpretations as belonging to a larger recurring trend in the natural sciences. She uses the term neurosexism for this new form of sexism and it seems that the notion has begun to circulate already and is slowly being ingrained in the common memory.

At this point I can say that it is difficult to give a negative review to this book. The passion with which it is written absorbs the reader and it gives off a breath of fresh air that stays with you until you finish the book. It is a compelling text, which is all the more valuable in a society where gender stereotypes are so ingrained, that even respected scientists can be found claiming, for example, that the stronger representation of women in biology, psychology and medicine, reflects a feminine tendency to nurture, and a desire to work with living things – as if a woman researcher's desire to study a

particular subject can never be fully attributed her individual history and interests, without factoring in her gender identity, or claims that differences in gender representation can never be fully overcome, as it would be unnatural to do so, and, even worse, that the differences that certain neuroscientists point out imply different emotional and intellectual needs between the sexes, which should be met in different ways for a healthy development. The fact that serious academics can suggest, behind a thin veil of preoccupation for human development, differential child rearing and education, after centuries of struggle against such segregation, is appalling. We can only hope that this book will be translated in as many languages as possible, because it should reach not only academics, but also the larger public, intoxicated for too long by poorly documented writing on gender differences. In Romanian, the book was translated in 2011 by Nemira publishing house, but with a poor choice of name „Capcanele sexelor”.

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New Series. Issue No. 4 (18)/ 2015
Website www.analyze-journal.ro