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### The Bombshell

#### Cordelia Fine, Neurosexism, and My Mother (again)

In 1972, when I was ten, my mother co-authored a study on sex-stereotyping in children's readers entitled "Dick & Jane as Victims." The study's authors, who called themselves Women on Words & Images (WOWI), examined 134 elementary school readers from 14 different publishers all then in use in three suburban New Jersey public school systems, mine included. They found appalling ratios of male to female representation:

Boy-centered stories to girl-centered stories 5:2

Adult male main characters to adult female main characters 3:1

Male biographies to female biographies 6:1

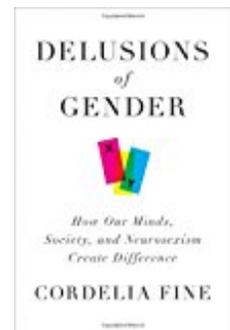
Male animal stories to female animal stories 2:1

Male folk or fantasy stories to female folk or fantasy stories 4:1

"By the age of eight," they wrote, "ninety-nine percent agreement is found among children of both sexes as to which sex does which job, what kind of person a girl or boy should be and what the role limitations and expectations are. School readers must assume their responsibility in directing the subliminal learning process toward more psychologically constructive ends."

Thirty-eight years later, the situation hasn't much improved. According to cognitive neuroscientist Cordelia Fine's explosive new book, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*, gender bias has potentially worsened by going underground, becoming unconscious and unintended. Fine discusses myriad studies showing grave instances in schools and the workplace of unconscious gender bias. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study of eighth graders in 34 countries found that "the more strongly males are implicitly associated with science and females with liberal arts, the greater boys' advantage in science and math in the eighth grade."

In another study, before taking GRE-type exams one group was shown sexist commercials,



another group neutral ads. “Men in both conditions,” Fine writes, “and women who had seen neutral ads, attempted more math problems than verbal ones. But women who had seen the sexist ads showed exactly the opposite pattern, avoiding the math questions.”

In countless studies, identical resumes with only a name change -- say, George to Georgina -- found potential employers significantly favoring the male. Furthermore, Fine cites research indicating that those who pride themselves on their lack of bias most persistently make unconscious stereotypical judgements. Fine concludes: “Indeed, subtle triggers for stereotype threat seem to be more harmful than blatant cues, which suggests the intriguing possibility that stereotype threat may be more of an issue for women now than it was decades ago, when people were more loose-lipped when it came to denigrating female ability.”

This insidious sexism -- Fine has coined it “neurosexism” -- hasn’t been helped by the scientific community. Some neuroscientists’ questionable findings have entered both popular culture and the classroom. Brain imaging technology (PET scans, fMRIs), has allowed a neuroscientific-based discourse to dress up age-old gender bias—women are more empathetic; men more competitive -- as “hard-wired.” Fine’s analysis debunks the spurious science behind best-selling popular psychology books which locate gender-difference in brain biology e.g. *Why Gender Matters*, *What Could He Be Thinking*, *Leadership and the Sexes*, *The Essential Difference*, *The Sexual Paradox*, *Why Mars and Venus Collide*, and *The Female Brain* by Louann Brizendine (the Phyllis Schlafly of neuroscience).

These books, Fine says, make claims approaching 19th century arguments. In 1873, Professor Edward Clarke, Harvard Medical School proposed that intellectual effort in girls and women sent energy rushing dangerously from ovaries to the brain, endangering fertility and causing other severe medical ailments. Nowadays, Brizendine suggests women are ruled by hormones; only after menopause can they be considered rational thinkers. Simon Baron-Cohen, a Cambridge professor of psychiatry, concludes female brains are better at empathizing, therefore: “People with the female brain make the most wonderful counsellors, primary school teachers, nurses, carers, therapists, social workers, mediators, group facilitators or personnel staff.”

Fine describes contemporary studies of gender representation in children’s books, television and movies: among Caldecott Medal awardees and 155 bestselling children’s books the male to female ratio was 2:1. Of 19,664 children’s TV programs in 24 countries, 32 percent of main characters are female. In the 101 top-grossing G-rated movies from 1990-2005 less than a third of the speaking roles went to females.

How could things still be this bad? Fine notes that genetically males and females will always have much more in common than not. So why as a society are we so invested in stressing the differences between the sexes, prescribing gender stereotypes from gestation onward? How can we stop this scourge from further injuring our species? Recent discoveries about the brain highlight its plasticity, its ability to adapt, invent, respond to changing environments. Why not rid our brains of this outdated gender bias? Alas, Fine barely addresses this issue.

But Fine's book goes far in confirming what the great feminist John Stuart Mill wrote in *The Subjection of Women* (1869):

I deny that any one knows or can know the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to one another. Until conditions of equality exist, no one can possibly assess the natural differences between women and men, distorted as they have been. What is natural to the two sexes can only be found out by allowing both to develop and use their faculties freely.

(Mill's wife Harriet Taylor co-wrote much of his work; though he insisted she put her name on it, she more forcefully resisted author credit: gender bias cuts deeply into our own psyches.)

In *Dick & Jane as Victims*, my mother and her colleagues emphasized that both Jane and Dick are victims of sex-role socialization. She learns her sex is restricted to being sex-objects and martyrs, submissive and servile; he is submitted to a crippling pressure to compete, achieve, produce, to stifle emotion, sensitivity and gentleness. Today, a girl crosses the gender line -- wears pants, plays baseball, likes science -- with less fear of negative social repercussions, but a boy is still negatively scrutinized if he puts on a dress, plays with dolls, or takes ballet lessons.

"The practice of separating all people into two arbitrarily defined molds on the basis of sex alone," WOWI concludes, "is the Procrustean bed of modern life. Those who do not fit are either stretched out or chopped up. We stretch our sons to fill the ideal dominant male role and fragment our daughters' personalities to make them fit the servile female role. Both processes do violence to the individual. Each damaged person depletes the human resources of the whole society. How many damaged individuals can we afford?"

If only we'd all listen more keenly to the wisdom of our mothers.