

surprisingly but necessarily, he draws here on Sartre's life of Flaubert and the significance of the need to re-evaluate ones original project in order to make more context appropriate choices.

I have recommended '*How to be an Existentialist....*' to many people and all have gained a clearer understanding of Sartre than they had before.

Not only is it easier to write something long rather than short, it is easier to write something complicated rather than something simple. Cox has achieved something extremely impressive here. He has written something short and simple while not losing any of the depth and subtlety.

All three books complement each other well. *Sartre and Fiction* is a book I always wanted to write sometime, *How to be an Existentialist....* is a book I would have liked to have written, but to write them both I would need *The Sartre Dictionary*.

Martin Adams

Delusions of Gender

Cordelia Fine. (2010). London: Icon Books.

A few days before I wrote this review, two so-called 'alpha-males' - the former governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss-Khan - were exposed as a philandering loverat who secretly fathered a child with the family housekeeper, and an alleged rapist, respectively. The former lost his marital tie to the Kennedy clan; the latter was arrested and briefly banged up in New York's notorious Riker's prison. Why did they do it? According to the media's favourite expert on male/female behaviour, John Gray (of the *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* franchise), the culprit is male hormones which make it difficult for powerful men to be faithful. 'Men,' he opined, '*are basically wired up to be polygamous*'; therefore, in a loving, monogamous (perhaps he meant monotonous?) relationship, the man's testosterone level [goes] down, so he's inclined to seek out risky behaviour to push it back up again.'

If you think that's a lot of hooey, you will relish Fine's *Delusions of Gender*: a fiercely argued and witty expose of what she calls neurosexism. As she reminds readers, neurosexism has form; it's the 21st century version of using cod-science to justify male privilege. From Aristotle's wandering womb to Victorian patriarchs measuring and weighing male and female brains to prove that higher education for women causes infertility and/or insanity, votes for women, promiscuity, its function was and remains to push Nora back into her doll's house. Based on supposedly unbiased, peer-reviewed research and cutting-edge technology (positron emission tomography [PET]; functional magnetic resonance imaging [fMRI] brain scans), neurosexism is tainted old wine in shiny new bottles,

used to explain everything from career women morphing into full time yummy mummies, male insensitivity and the pink princess phenomenon. For according to a Disney spokesperson, young girls ‘... *like to dress up, they like to role-play. It’s a genetic desire to like pink, to like the castle, to turn their dads into princes.*’

While deploring the idiocies of pop psychology and the triumphal coverage the media gives it, the book’s target is the unproven and controversial science – and the researchers behind it - which is routinely trotted out to legitimise sweeping gender assertions. Fine is not exactly ploughing a lonely furrow: a spate of books (all by women) have challenged neurosexism, including Melissa Hines (*Brain/Gender*), Natasha Walter (*Living Dolls*) and the most recent UK publication, *Brain Storm: the flaws in the science of sex difference*, by Rebecca Jordan-Young. These authors don’t dispute that the sexes differ physiologically, due to their reproductive processes. What they assert is that femininity and masculinity are fundamentally social/cultural – not biological - constructs. As is my wont, I had several books on the go while reading *Delusions*, and found this felicitous phrase - ‘*the holy trinity of determinism*’ – in Michael Foley’s *The Age of Absurdity*. Or, the Father is genetics (behaviour determined by genes); the Son, evolutionary psychology (behaviour determined by evolved survival mechanisms); and the Holy Ghost, neuroscience (behaviour determined by a hard-wired brain). Note that ideas of choice (existential or otherwise) and, admittedly dated, Freudian determinism (Oedipal/Castration Complexes; baby = penis, etc.) don’t even merit a look-in; how humbling is that for our profession?

Because Fine, et al, devote hundreds of pages, and provide compendious lists of references, to refute the Holy Trinity, I won’t bother; except to repeat that [1] there is no consensus in the scientific community linking hormones with gendered behaviour; [2] evolutionary psychology is a fatalistic – and contested – theory that insists our responses to the contemporary world were decided millions of years ago; therefore, any attempts to create a better, more equitable society are doomed; and [3] despite claims that we are ‘hard-wired’ in utero (the infamous testosterone marination of the male foetal brain), there is nothing more biologically similar to a male brain than a female one; and both are extraordinarily plastic – continually making fresh neural pathways in response to experience.

Alas, such explanations are rather staid in comparison to the razzle-dazzle of neurosexism: its arcane medical terminology (corpus callosum; amygdala, anterior cingulate), and expensive complex machinery generating impressive 3-D pictures revealing that different areas of the male and female brain ‘light up’ when their owners are given a task. While it’s hard for the layperson to argue with neuro-imaging, a significant number of scientists have derided the findings of this mechanical peeping

into the brain as '*blobology*', declaring that no one knows what, if anything, it proves; and besides, the brain is not synonymous with the mind.

In the publish-or-perish real world, however, the reputations of some academics are based on unproven assertions – what Fine calls '*sex and premature speculation*' (one of her clever chapter headings, along with '*brain scams*' and '*gender detectives*'); and she and Walter convincingly demolish the claims of two eminent speculators regularly name-checked by John Gray and his ilk: Cambridge University psychologist Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, author of *The Essential Difference*; and Dr Luann Brizendine, director of the University of California-SF Women's Mood and Hormone Clinic, author of *The Female Brain*. Each is a veritable gift to the pop psychologist. According to Baron-Cohen, '*The female brain is predominately hardwired for empathy. The male brain ... for understanding and building systems.*' His unabashed conclusion: those with E-brains '*make the most wonderful counsellors, primary school teachers, nurses and carers*'; while the lucky recipients of the systematising S-brain become heads of departments, titans of industry and Nobel Prize winners. Brizendine is equally categorical. Women '*tend to know what people are feeling while a man can't seem to spot an emotion unless someone cries or threatens bodily harm.*' Both cite the same suspect study – the newborn study, which supposedly demonstrates that days old female infants are empathisers because they prefer looking at a smiling human face, while male infants are systemisers because they prefer a mechanical mobile painted with lopsided facial features - as evidence of nature over nurture (socialisation).

Fine is particularly furious with Brizendine (a woman, how could she!), and gleefully quotes from a review of *The Female Brain* in the prestigious journal *Nature*: [Brizendine] '*... disappointingly fails to meet even the most basic standards of scientific accuracy and balance.*' Fine provides compelling evidence that the newborn study is fatally flawed in its design; has never been successfully replicated; and its findings are contradicted by dozens of earlier studies. '*When you are claiming nothing less than evidence of the biological origins of a gender-stratified society,*' she says tartly, '*it helps to have a methodology that stands up to scrutiny.*' Unsurprisingly Brizendine and Baron-Cohen believe they are fearless and objective pioneers who refuse to be brow-beaten by small-minded critics motivated by '*political correctness*'. (If you substitute '*black*' for '*female*'; I think it will convince you that this is not PC run amok.) As Walter reminds us, so-called female intuition (empathy) is just as likely a '*subordinate's intuition*', *akin to the submissive behaviour of any disenfranchised group, such as black slaves in the American south, whose physical safety depends on accurately reading the mood of the oppressor and anticipating his intentions.*' And Fine notes, any stereotype '*...*

through its hierarchal ordering of two or more groups ... is essentially a statement about dominance or status.' Then there is the vexed question: why are studies showing sex difference privileged over the hundreds showing similarity? Fine calls this '*the file drawer phenomenon*', where research showing little or no gender difference languish. Not sexy enough, presumably, for publication. (I confess that her book only confirmed my long-standing suspicion of experimental psychology and its myriad of studies proving anything at all; or, lies, damn lies and statistics.)

Although neurosexism promotes damaging, limiting, potentially self-fulfilling stereotypes, the assertion of male/female essentialism is ubiquitous. Many of our clients (and doubtless some therapists) believe it, albeit reluctantly, particularly those who tried and failed to practice '*gender-neutral*' parenting. One of the pleasures of Fine's book is the section titled '*Recycling Gender*', which briskly makes the reassuring points: [1] it is impossible to provide a gender-neutral environment; [2] small children, in their search for identity, will act as 'gender police'; and [3] the impact of peer pressure at school is ferocious (this is typically when boys who once cried as unselfconsciously and easily as their sisters learn they mustn't). For this chapter alone, I recommend *Delusions of Gender* to therapists of all persuasions.

Finally, what/who is responsible for the resurrection of these previously discredited essentialist ideas? Fine somewhat naively blames opportunistic researchers rushing to publish unproven theories, pop psychologists feeding on their sensational, unproven speculations, hack journalists giving them air time and unscrupulous editors who just want to sell papers. Walter's explanation is more sophisticated. She believes neurosexism coincides with the demise of the left and retrenchment of the right. Those who've lost faith (or never had it) in possibility of social change and greater equity, she writes, are 'obviously likely to be attracted by apparently scientific theories that back up their feelings that unequal status quo is only natural.'

I think it's only fair to tell you that the *Observer* article did have a disclaimer at the end (that some scientists contest Gray's theories, and even quoted one of them); a prime example of bolting the proverbial barn door after the horse had bolted. In any case, I think I can predict Gray's next book: *Venus Murders Mars and Pleads Temporary Insanity*.

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3,096 Days

Natascha Kampusch. (2010). London: Penguin.

Introduction

3,096 Days is an autobiographical book about Natascha Kampusch's story of abduction and eight year imprisonment in her kidnapper's cellar. Ten year old Natascha was kidnapped on the morning of 2 March 1998 in Vienna by Wolfgang Priklopil while she was on her way to school. Natascha managed to escape from her captivity on 23 August 2006 at the age of eighteen. On the day of her escape her kidnapper committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a moving train. Natascha wrote this book with the collaboration of Heike Gronemeier and Corinna Milborn four years after her escape at the age of twenty two. The book consists of ten chapters and the epilogue. The first chapter introduces the reader to Natascha's experience of difficult childhood and it provides a quite detailed description of her relationships with her parents as well as a description of the relational dynamics between the family members. Along the same lines, it allows the reader to paint a picture regarding the physical environment in which Natascha grew up until the age of ten and gain an understanding of the interplay between her social and family circumstances and dynamics, her individual psychological reactions and struggles and the way in which she viewed herself in relation to other people of her age. The second chapter focuses on Natascha's last day before her abduction and, more specifically, on her memories of the actual moment of her abduction, her initial reactions to what had happened to her and her first night in captivity. The next eight chapters revolve around the experience of her imprisonment until the day of her escape. The author describes in great depth the severe physical, emotional and psychological abuse and humiliation she had been subjected to by her abductor, her way of responding to her abuse and the reality of her captivity and, the manner in which she related to her kidnapper during her long term imprisonment and isolation. The epilogue of the book is dedicated to the aftermath of Natascha's escape and return to the 'outside' world. In this last part of the book, Natascha reflects upon the impact that the media's way of dealing with her case had on her and also she ponders upon her own attitude towards the predicament she went through.