

Neuroscientists stress importance of the study of sex influences on brain function

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A commentary on how to improve sex differences research, by Professor Gina Rippon from the Aston Brain Centre, Aston University and international colleagues, has been published in the *Journal of*

Neuroscience Research (JNR).

The commentary is in response to a new JNR editorial mandate that all research published in the journal should include the exploration of [sex differences](#) - or justify its exclusion.

It has been claimed the new policy is to counteract critics who label such research 'sexist' and call for its prevention. Coverage of the issue has included leaders in The Times and the LA Times.

Rippon and her colleagues emphasise the importance of the study of sex influences on brain development and function, but highlight some key problems and pitfalls that can stand in the way of generating reliable data and conclusions in this area.

Professor Rippon is delighted that some of their suggestions have already been incorporated into the new policy. "When it comes to humans, for example, many unmeasured social or physical factors may contribute to sex differences in the brain," she explained, stressing that despite the gendered nature of our experiences, studies usually only take account of whether participants are male or female.

"The possible contribution of these uncaptured variables should be studied, but if this is not possible, this should at least be acknowledged in scientists' discussion of their findings," she added.

JNR's publication of Rippon and colleagues' commentary, which draws on past criticism and debate about this area of research, is particularly timely. In recent weeks, feminist perspectives on the science of sex differences have been dismissed by some as 'political correctness' that harms science, as well as misleading parents and undermining arguments for gender equity by ignoring scientific evidence.

Professor Rippon said that claims that she and other critics of sex difference research have tried to prevent research or are 'anti-science' couldn't be further from the truth.

"Of course it's important that there is research into sex, gender, and the [brain](#), but given the impact such research can have on areas such as parenting, education, employment and health it is even more important that it is done really well. The focus of our criticisms has always been on how the research is done: are the findings reliable, are the interpretations valid, and are they being communicated responsibly to the public?"

Provided by Aston University

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