

The gendered brain: Pink and blue or fifty shades of grey matter?

March 4 2019



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The age-old concept that brains, like bodies, are either female or male is

inaccurate and misleading Professor Gina Rippon argues in her book, [The Gendered Brain](#), published by Bodley Head. She points out that we live in a gendered world, bombarded 24/7 with gender stereotypes, arising from deeply ingrained beliefs that our brains and our behaviours are determined by our sex, determining our skills and preferences and everything from toy choice to career choice. It is this, not a fixed biological blueprint, which shapes our brains.

Gina Rippon, Professor Emeritus of Cognitive Neuroimaging, at the Aston Brain Centre, Aston University said:

"People ask me if there are differences in the gendered [brain](#) and the short answer is yes, because our brains reflect the lives we have lived, the attitudes and experiences to which we have been exposed. And If we live in a world where there are many [gender stereotypes](#) about what girls and boys, women and men can and can't do, where we are constantly bombarded with gendered messages from [social media](#) and other sources, those experiences and those messages can change our brains.

Drawing on a wide range of developmental and social psychology research, as well as studies of cognitive and critical neuroscience, Rippon unpacks the stereotypes we endure from our earliest moments and shows how these messages can mould our ideas of ourselves and even shape our brains.

Professor Rippon added: "One of the things people are interested in is what kinds of messages the outside world might have for the [developing brain](#). We know that one of the key things our brains can do is make us social beings, ensuring we are engaged in the right social networks and belong to the right in-group.

"We find that from an early age babies are searching for social messages in the outside world. If these junior 'gender detectives' are exposed to

messages that, for example, boys play with Lego and are good at science and systems, whereas girls want to be princesses and are good at caring and [empathy](#), then this can divert their developing brains down different pathways, arriving at different educational, occupational and social destinations."

In her book, Professor Rippon addresses an argument that has been going on for hundreds of years, one where we think of either nature or nurture as determining what our brains are like. She suggests that in the 21st century we need to get away from that debate and "acknowledge that nature is entangled with nurture and that investigating the way in which our worlds change our brains is a much better way of understanding the brains we've got and what they can actually do" says Rippon.

"I think it is important that we move away from the concept that if you're a man you have a male brain and if you're a women you have a female brain. It blinkers our expectations of ourselves and other people, and it even blinkers our brains," added Rippon.

Provided by Aston University

Citation: The gendered brain: Pink and blue or fifty shades of grey matter? (2019, March 4) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-03-gendered-brain-pink-blue-fifty.html>

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