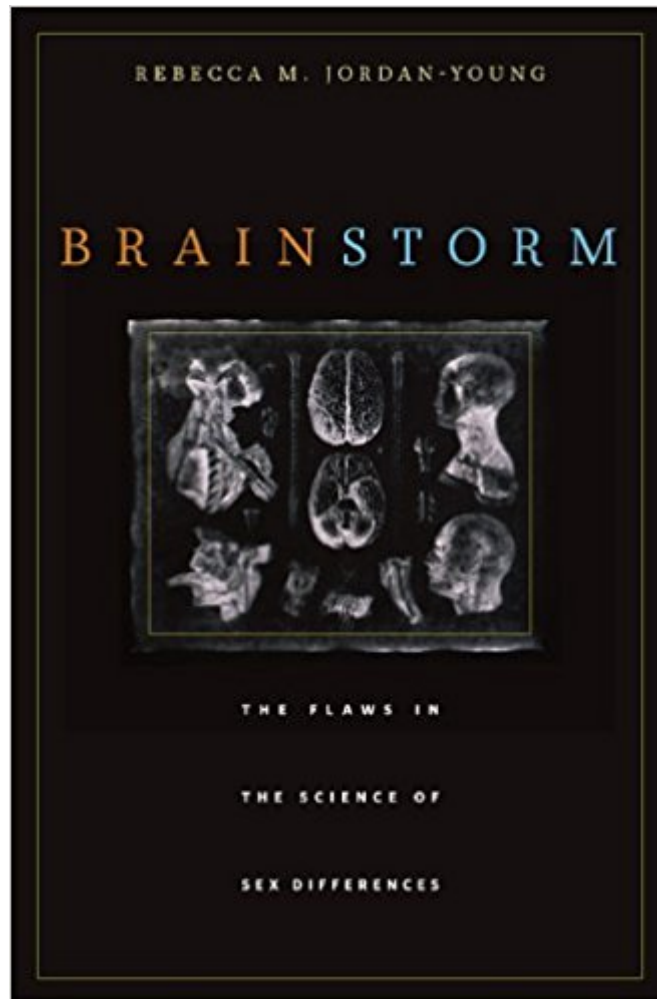


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Brain Storm: The Flaws In The Science Of Sex Differences



Synopsis

Female and male brains are different, thanks to hormones coursing through the brain before birth. That's taught as fact in psychology textbooks, academic journals, and bestselling books. And these hardwired differences explain everything from sexual orientation to gender identity, to why there aren't more women physicists or more stay-at-home dads. In this compelling book, Rebecca Jordan-Young takes on the evidence that sex differences are hardwired into the brain. Analyzing virtually all published research that supports the claims of a human brain organization theory, Jordan-Young reveals how often these studies fail the standards of science. Even if careful researchers point out the limits of their own studies, other researchers and journalists can easily ignore them because brain organization theory just sounds so right. But if a series of methodological weaknesses, questionable assumptions, inconsistent definitions, and enormous gaps between ambiguous findings and grand conclusions have accumulated through the years, then science isn't scientific at all. Elegantly written, this book argues passionately that the analysis of gender differences deserves far more rigorous, biologically sophisticated science. The evidence for hormonal sex differentiation of the human brain better resembles a hodge-podge pile than a solid structure. Once we have cleared the rubble, we can begin to build newer, more scientific stories about human development.

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Customer Reviews

As a layperson, I found the reading slightly difficult. Not because of the author's writing style, which

is excellent given the material, but because it's not your typical pop-science, easy read. You can't sneak in a few chapters in the waiting room at the doctor's office. I like how she painstakingly defines each concept, and even gives non-academic folks (like me) a fairly thorough description of the types of studies that have been used in developing brain organization theory (and tells you that if you've already mastered those concepts, to go ahead and skip certain sections). She even wrestles with how to define certain terms and concepts because she doesn't want to introduce bias (unlike many of the studies she cites). She delicately balances the line so as to not talk down to the reader, but writes intelligently enough so that, I believe, even other brain researchers won't feel insulted. Although I loved Cordelia Fine's *Delusions of Gender*, Jordan-Young avoids the sarcasm and snarkiness that is so prevalent in Fine's work. As a result, *BrainStorm* is a serious survey of dozens of brain studies, whose results are really not as clear-cut as the researchers would have us believe. Muddling through the incessant citations can slow you down, as she often cites multiple studies at once; but this cannot be avoided, and indeed, is necessary to make her points. Perhaps most striking is the fact that virtually none of the studies uses the same definition (or any definition at all) for words like "feminine" and "masculine." When pressed, researchers and scientists insist that such concepts are "common sense" and require no explicit definitions.

Jordan-Young's book is a enormously worthwhile exploration as to what has gone wrong in brain science. While other scholars within science studies have pointed toward the many ways in which bias are (perhaps unavoidably) structured into scientific studies, Jordan-Young offers a careful exploration as to the specific ways in which such research has been flawed. Much of her analysis concerns ways in which brain scientists have measured either masculinity/femininity (in research on sex differences) or homo/heterosexuality (in research on "the gay gene"). While many brain scientists have taken these constructs for granted, it turns out that studies are using many different definitions in their research, even contradictory ones, yet they have generally failed to recognize this basic fact, with many researchers citing earlier studies that actually **contradict** theirs as evidence in favor of their own conclusions. Jordan-Young seems to have written this evaluation in hopes of pointing out these flaws to both a popular audience and to brain researchers themselves. It's been disappointing then, to see the reviews this book has received in the scientific journals. Basically, the response has been to agree that Joran-Young has pointed out many serious flaws in the research, but to then go on and assert "Well, there are **other** studies that I like, and Jordan-Young does not discuss those. So overall, we should continue to believe in these sex/sexual orientation differences." OK, well, I'm not a brain researcher myself, just an interested observer, so **perhaps** they're right.

BUT, what about all the junk science that's there? Why not be concerned about it? Why not say "Whoa! Look at all this junk! How did all this get here?"

This is a brilliant book. It calmly, with substantive evidence, and careful dissection of the research shows that the research on brain organization and the subsequent claims about gender are built on a house of sand (if I may be allowed to shift metaphors). Jordan-Young, who has a background in science and it shows, points out some troubling problems with the research: definitions of key terms have changed over time but the old and new studies are lumped together as if they were comparable (they are not), contemporaneous studies that do not measure the same things are lumped together as if they were comparable (they are not), contrary results are not reported, as well as other problems. The bottom line: the supposedly solid evidence on which gender differences (and their subsequent implications for gendered behavior) are not even close to being on solid ground. In the spirit of true science, she calls for more careful research. I have taught Psychology of Women, Critical Thinking and other psychology courses for many years. I have been dismayed at the books claiming to present the research on gender comparisons, but in fact being highly selective about what they choose to report (their side only), talking only biology and ignoring social psychology (like the book "The Female Brain") and other cheap tricks. Jordan-Young avoids selection bias by examining every study done on the subject of brain organization, leaving nothing out. Many of her criticisms are familiar to me and others who teach gender studies but her synthesis and conclusions are brilliantly her own. She takes the problems and criticisms a giant leap forward. This book is refreshing because it is neither diatribe nor superficial, unlike so many books that purport to be about gender differences.

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