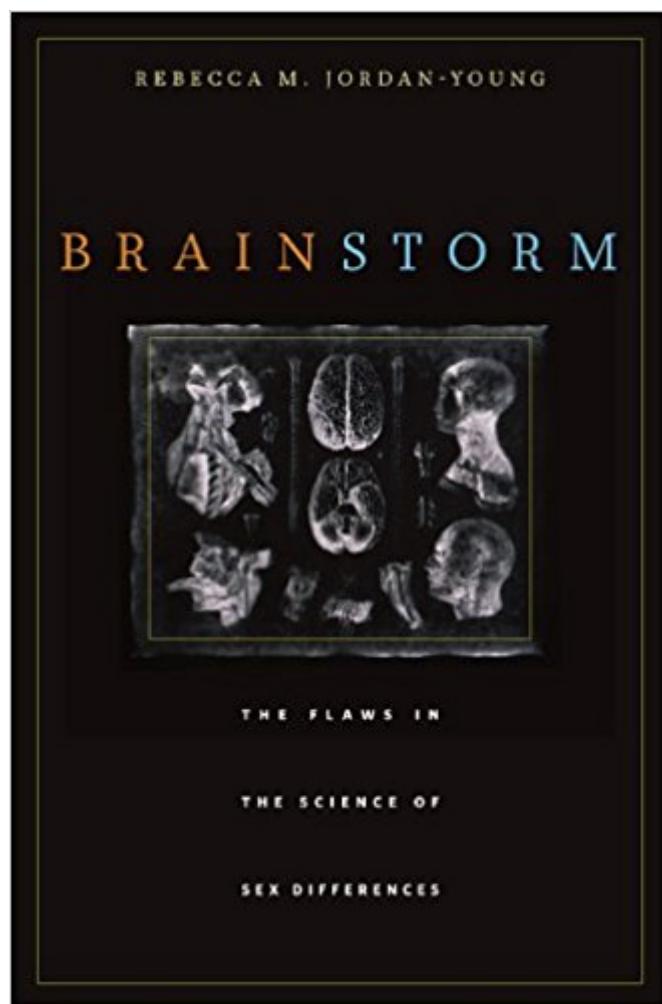


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# Brain Storm: The Flaws In The Science Of Sex Differences



## 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 "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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I'm the ideal test reader for Brain Storm. I've always had reservations about the sweeping claims

that there are fundamental differences in the organization of male and female brains, caused by prenatal hormones. But the sheer number of published studies that seemed to give incontrovertible evidence led me to assume that the theory was sound. This elegantly written and fascinating book has changed my mind. Jordan-Young's comprehensive analysis of the array of conflicting results and methodological weaknesses shows that we have closed the book on this topic far too soon. Her warning is one that all scientists can agree with: Careful! (Lisa Diamond, author of *Sexual Fluidity*) This important and intellectually powerful book shows that a dominant paradigm in human sex differences is held together by chewing gum. By painstakingly examining a large and contradictory literature, Jordan-Young shows the weakness of the brain organization hypothesis. She has so much respect for the scientific method that she can hope that reason and integrity will help create a better, more empirically sound theory of sex differences, and she reaches out to scientists to offer a glimpse of a new psychobiology. (Anne Fausto-Sterling, author of *Myths of Gender*) This is a book of remarkable depth that sets a new standard for clear scientific thinking about complex behavioral traits, as well as for interdisciplinary scholarship. Rebecca Jordan-Young charts a fresh new course through the morass of questions about gender and sexuality with enviable humor, fairness, and intellectual power. (Evan Balaban, McGill University) *Brain Storm* poses the most comprehensive challenge yet to the claim that prenatal hormone exposure permanently structures the brain to be either masculine or feminine, and does so in a highly engaging, fair-minded narrative that is a delight to read. (Stephen J. Ceci and Wendy M. Williams, Cornell University) Jordan-Young has written a stunning book that demolishes most of the science associated with the dominant paradigm of the development of sex and gender identity, behavior, and orientation. The current paradigm, brain organization theory, proposes: "Because of early exposure to different sex hormones, males and females have different brains

Rebecca M. Jordan-Young is a sociomedical scientist and Tow Associate Professor for Distinguished Scholars in the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Barnard College, Columbia University.

Excellent, meticulous research and well written. Rebecca M. Jordan-Young clearly, concisely discusses the science of prenatal hormones, gender, and the mind. An expert in every sense of the word.

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. Because what is considered feminine and masculine changes over time and varies between cultures, these definitions are not constant, but the research (which spans several decades) treats them as though they are fixed and unchanging concepts that don't need to be spelled out. She points to several studies that cite previous research to support their hypotheses, when in reality, those studies actually CONTRADICT each other because of varying definitions of key terms. All in all, a very thorough and extremely well-researched read. I often found myself marveling at the amount of data she has obviously pored through to carefully and thoughtfully present to the reader. Highly recommended for the layperson interested in brain research.

*Brain Storm* is a brilliant tour-de-force of analysis of the scientific literature on the organizational/activational (aka prenatal hormone) theory that reigns in neuroscience and psychology. Through a very careful analysis of the studies themselves Jordan-Young makes the very persuasive argument that there isn't a consistent body of evidence supporting the theory that gender and sexual orientation differences are caused by prenatal exposure to hormones. This will come as shock to some who find this theory to be canonical or 'settled law.' But Jordan-Young's careful, methodical deconstruction of the findings from hundreds of studies quickly reveals that there's no 'there' there. Such supposedly incontrovertible evidence is revealed as the product of an

almost willful suspension of critical thinking on the part of the scientists working in this area--some of them don't come off too well here, and Jordan-Young treats them over-generously IMHO. Yes, the writing's rather dense in spots but Jordan-Young's an academic and the book was brought out by Harvard University Press. The author's also trying to avoid some of the inaccuracies created by simplistic metaphors found in many of the pop-sci books on this topic. I have PhD in the humanities but am quite well versed in the secondary literature on this subject and STILL struggled with parts of this book. But Jordan-Young is very kind to us non-experts and nicely sums up her arguments along the way. If you're a fan of Cordelia Fine's or Anne Fausto-Sterling's work, this is a must read! One small quibble: as a cultural historian I would have liked to hear the author's take on exactly WHY so many scientists have been so invested in essentialist theories of gender and sexual difference, to the point that they're unwilling to examine the suppositions on which their own research is grounded. Why so much scientific essentialism and why now? It'd make a tidy feminist argument if all the research had been done by men, but some of the most prominent scientists working in this area today are women; a handful of others are gay men. What exactly is going on in American society just now that makes the flight to biological determinism so darned attractive to so many; so attractive that we're willing to lower our standards for what constitutes legitimate scientific inquiry to 'prove' that gender and sexual orientation are in-born? Perhaps it's the value of essentialist arguments to undergird legal rights claims currently being made by LGBT activists (the "Lady Gaga theory of gay origins") or cultural reactions to women's social and cultural gains ("Men and women ARE different!") But that's another book.... I'll take this one for now!

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