

Gary Smalley and Dr. John Trent: Right-Brain/Left Brain Pseudoscience

**(The following is excerpted from the book *Prophets of PsychoHeresy II*
by Martin and Deidre Bobgan, which is now out-of-print.)**

Gary Smalley has a bachelor's degree in psychology; John Trent has a Ph. D. in marriage and family counseling. Both have gone to seminary and therefore serve as "good" examples of amalgamania. Amalgamania is the title of one of the chapters of our book *PsychoHeresy*.¹ By amalgamania we mean the zealous practice of integrating psychology and the Bible in order to help people better understand their problems and to provide solutions for them. Actually all of the psychologists we discuss are amalgamators, but the ones who have theological training as well as psychological training are most culpable.

Smalley and Trent have written a number of books. One of their books, titled *The Language of Love*,² is published and promoted by Focus on the Family. This book is another example of what Dobson supports and promotes. Smalley and Trent discuss this book with Dobson on his radio broadcast. The title of the broadcast is "Learning to Communicate."³ On the broadcast Dobson strongly supports and endorses *The Language of Love* and the work of Smalley and Trent. The information given on the broadcast is similar to that in the book.

In *The Language of Love* Smalley and Trent present a technique which utilizes "word pictures." On the radio broadcast Smalley says:

It's a language method where, for example, a woman can say basically whatever she wants to her husband and he'll not only understand her instantly, but he'll literally be able to feel her feelings."⁴

If you read this last statement carefully, word for word, you will see that it contains an extreme promise. Is the promise true? We shall see.

Smalley and Trent tell us that to communicate effectively with others we must paint a picture in their minds by using stories. They indicate that word pictures are found throughout Scripture and that "word pictures tap into the right side of the brain."⁵ Their system is based upon what they believe to be scientific information about the two hemispheres of the brain. But, as we shall show, their techniques are built upon a false foundation and should therefore be ignored.

Smalley and Trent's theme is that males are mostly left-brained and females are mostly right-brained. They say:

What occurs in the womb merely sets the stage for men and women to "specialize" in two different ways of thinking. . . . The left brain houses more of the logical, analytical, factual, and aggressive centers of thought. It's the side of the brain most men reserve for the majority of their waking hours. . . . On the other hand, most women spend the majority of their days and nights camped out on the right side of the brain. It's the side that harbors the center for feelings, as well as the primary relational, language, and communication skills; enables them to do fine-detail work; sparks imagination; and makes an afternoon devoted to art and fine music actually enjoyable.⁶

They also say:

If a woman truly expects to have meaningful communication with her husband, she must activate the right side of his brain. And if a man truly wants to communicate with his wife; he must enter her world of emotion.⁷ (Emphasis theirs.)

Many Christians believe in the right-brain/left-brain pseudoscience. They followed in the wake of the first flush of false teaching generated by incomplete findings having to do with persons with brain damage. Then without further ado, they embrace the implications, label them science, use them to support their own ideas, and bring them right into the church.

Nobelist Dr. Roger Sperry says, “The left-right dichotomy . . . is an idea with which it is easy to run wild.”⁸ Sperry also says:

The more we learn, the more we recognize the unique complexity of any one individual intellect and the stronger the conclusion becomes that the individuality inherent in our brain networks makes that of fingerprints or facial features gross and simple by comparison.⁹

Dr. Michael Gazzaniga, in a book titled *The Social Brain*, has a chapter titled “Left-Brain, Right-Brain Mania: A Debunking.” He says:

Where does all of this conjecture come from? How did some laboratory findings of limited generality get so outrageously misinterpreted? Why were they picked up so hungrily by the press and then embraced by every sort of scientific dilettante? There are several reasons. The left-brain/right-brain dichotomy was simple and understandable and provided a way to talk about modern brain research and how it applied to everyday experience. Certainly no one was going to argue that people have artistic-intuitive skills and logical-linguistic skills. *Prima facie* there are manifestly different activities of mind. So science is used to prove that one set of skills is in the left brain and another in the right, which in turn proves that mental skills are different, and therefore able to be differentially trained. The image of one part of the brain doing one thing and the other part something entirely different was there, and that it was a confused concept seemed to make no difference. . . .

The runaway fervor for such ideas relates, in part, to the difficulty in communicating scientific ideas to the general public. To really understand concepts arising out of experimental data is a serious business, and most people do not have the time or interest to assess information at that level. There is an extensive and usually foreign vocabulary to learn. The necessary qualifying remarks and constraints on the ideas prove to be too much of a burden for the potential audience. So scientific journalism purveys its stories on simple-to-understand claims that most people can relate to, preferably at a personal level. This wouldn't matter for the present story except for the fact that the distortions get in the way of why split-brain patients are truly interesting. **And the oversimplifications and outright erroneous information have also tended to trivialize the complexity of the integrated processes of our minds.**¹⁰ (Emphasis added.)

In conclusion to the chapter, Gazzaniga says:

By the late 1960s and early 1970s the realization was spreading that the simple dichotomies of that time did little to advance knowledge about how cognitive systems work. Neuropsychology was at risk. Isolating mental systems or claiming that isolated mental systems process information differently does not really illuminate the nature of cognition.¹¹

Christians as well as non-Christians use the hemispheres to describe personality types. The so-called left-brain person is thought to be linear, logical, analytical, and unemotional; and the right-brained person is thought to be spatial, creative, mystical, intuitive, and emotional. While such adjectives may describe people to various degrees during various activities and in different work or social situations, this certainly is no basis for knowing or understanding an individual. However, personality typologies are always popular even though they are as spurious as the astrological signs.

While brain research has shown some particular areas of strengths of one hemisphere over the other, Dr. Georg Deutsch of the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston says that “differences within a hemisphere account for more than differences between them.”¹² Neurologist Dr. John Mazziotta at the UCLA School of Medicine says:

Even on the most trivial tasks our studies showed that everything in the brain was in flux---both sides, the front and back, the top and bottom. It was tremendously complicated. **To think that you could reduce this to a simple left-right dichotomy would be misleading and oversimplified.**¹³ (Emphasis added.)

And while each hemisphere may specialize in certain activities, the only clear-cut function which only one side seems to have is related to speaking. The left hemisphere seems to control the muscles of the vocal tract. And that has to do with muscle control instead of emotional or cognitive functions.¹⁴

While Smalley claims that emotions are right-brain activities, they involve both hemispheres, though each hemisphere “seems to be more in control of different subsets of emotions, the left hemisphere being biased toward the positive and the right toward the negative emotions.”¹⁵

Dr. Jerre Levy, a biopsychologist at the University of Chicago, contends:

The two-brain myth was founded on an erroneous premise: that since each hemisphere was specialized, each must function as an independent brain. But in fact, just the opposite is true. To the extent that regions are differentiated in the brain, they must integrate their activities. Indeed, it is precisely that integration that gives rise to behavior and mental processes greater than and different from each region’s contribution. **Thus, since the central premise of the mythmakers is wrong, so are all the inferences derived from it.**¹⁶ (Emphasis added.)

We are not surprised when the whole world is deceived. Nor are we shocked when New Age promoters use the pseudoscience of brain hemisphere dichotomy to give a semblance of substance to their desires to market intuition, creativity, visualization, and mystical experience. What we are concerned about is Christians embracing and enthusiastically teaching myth as fact. We are alarmed when those who purport to speak for God use such “science falsely so-called” (1 Timothy 6:20) and “philosophies and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Colossians 2:8).

In his article titled “Neurobabble,” Dr. Laurence Miller says:

Brain research will continue to make genuine contributions to the quality of life, but it will be by way of an understanding and respect for the complex facts of neuroscience, not through the simplistic and potentially misleading efforts of the current crop of whole-brain half-wittedness.¹⁷

Rather than checking the accuracy of statements about right and left brain research and conclusions, too many have moved into the never never land of fantasy. Not only are their assumptions erroneous from a logical point of view; they have no support in Scripture.

Specifically Smalley and Trent not only promote left-brained, right-brained pseudoscience, but they also declare that men are mostly left-brained and women are mostly right brained. They say: “Specifically, medical

studies have shown that between the eighteenth and twenty-sixth week of pregnancy, something happens that forever separates the sexes.”¹⁸ Their footnote refers to a book by Dr. Richard Restak titled *The Brain*, page 43. In checking this out we found nothing on page 43 which would support this statement. We are not saying that the statement does not exist, only that it does not exist where they say it does. However, Restak, the author of the book quoted by Smalley and Trent, does say: “Although distinct anatomical differences between the brains of men and women are strongly **suspected**, no convincing proof has been found.”¹⁹ (Emphasis added.)

In addition Restak says:

. . . . no one has as yet convincingly demonstrated an anatomic difference between the brain structures of human males and females. These behavioral differences may be the result of chemical changes in brain function resulting from the influence of sex hormones in early prenatal development.²⁰

Compare the above statement with what Smalley and Trent say. Restak is saying that there may or may not be “an anatomic difference between the brain structures of human males and females.” Also, sex differences may or may not “be the result of chemical changes in brain function resulting from the influence of sex hormones in early prenatal development.”

Beryl Lieff Benderly is a contributing editor of *Psychology Today* and author of *The Myth of Two Minds: What Gender Means and Doesn't Mean*. In a section titled “Making too Much of Too Little,” Benderly discusses the fact that the gender differences in spatial and verbal abilities are small. She says:

Anne Fausto-Sterling, a medical sciences professor at Brown University, notes that male and female spatial and verbal abilities in fact constitute “majorly overlapping curves. It is absolutely false, just wrong” to claim that either sex’s performance is always better than the other. “More than half the time there’s no difference.”

What’s more, “the variation from one woman to another woman, or one man to another man, is much larger than the average difference between the sexes,” says University of Chicago biopsychology professor Jerre Levy, whose main area of research is the differences and interactions between the left and right sides of the brain. “Naturally occurring individual differences among people are just huge.”²¹

Dr. Anne Fausto-Sterling examines some of the purported differences between men and women in her book *Myths of Gender*. She says that the differences in verbal and spatial skills are quite small. In explaining that she says:

. . . if one looks at the variation (from lowest to highest performance) of spatial ability in a mixed population of males and females, 5 percent of it at most can be accounted for on the basis of sex. The other 95 percent of the variation is due to individual differences that have nothing to do with being male or female.²²

Because of more differences existing between persons within one gender than between males and females, Dr. Ruth Bleier, in her book *Science and Gender*, says:

. . . whatever characteristic is being measured, the range of variation is far greater *among* males or *among* females than *between* the two sexes. There is, in fact, far greater scientific and perhaps social justification for exploring and trying to understand the vast variance among individuals than the elusive, tiny variances between the sexes that elicit far greater attention and expenditure of research resources than they merit.”²³

And, Benderly makes a valid statistical point when she says:

And, finally, a finding of statistical significance doesn't mean that a difference is large enough to have any practical effect; it merely discounts chance as a cause.²⁴

Dr. Sally Springer and Dr. Georg Deutsch, in a book titled *Left Brain, Right Brain*, discuss the various research studies and available information on split-brain research as it applies to the two hemispheres of the brain. They say:

Our review of data from split-brain subjects has led us to the conclusion that hemispheric specialization is not an all-or-none phenomenon but, rather, falls on a continuum.²⁵

In their conclusion regarding sex differences, Springer and Deutsch say:

There is a great deal of overlap in the distribution of ability across men and women. Some women have better spatial abilities than most men, while some men have better verbal skills than most women.²⁶

Dr. Elaine Showalter is the author of *The Female Malady*. She says, "Surely the rising star of body parts in the 1980s is the right brain."²⁷ Further she says: "The right-brain school represents post-Aquarian fascination with alternative, especially Oriental, ways of knowing, and with androgyny." She refers to how some have accused Western society of being left-brained and overlooking the "intuitive mystical right brain" and says:

In the 1980's, pop psychologists have capitalized on these metaphysical speculations to market the right brain as a new target of opportunity like the G-spot. However out of shape, they tell us, your right brain can be pumped up in mental aerobics. The whole-brain pop industry is still perpetuating outrageous stereotypes in pseudo-scientific vocabulary.²⁸

An example is a recent advertisement for a book titled *Right Brain Sex*.²⁹

Because of the exploitation connected to misinformation promoted in such "pseudo-scientific vocabulary," Showalter believes that people need to be warned that "the functions of the brain's hemispheres, like other kinds of division of labor, are likely to be far more complicated than the simple, seductive division into left and right can explain."³⁰ Unfortunately for many Christians, when Smalley and Trent employ "pseudo-scientific vocabulary" they give credence to ideas and practices that oppose the truth of God's Word.

There is no indication in Scripture of a woman's brain being superior to a man's brain. Furthermore, the man is to be the head of the woman just as Christ is the head of the church (I Corinthians 11:3). While this is not a position of a superior brain; neither would it be a position of an inferior brain. It is also amazing to imagine that the Psalms could have been written by men who were, by Smalley and Trent's reasoning, affectively defective. The Psalms and Song of Solomon reveal a great variety of the feelings both felt and expressed by men.

After interviewing several researchers in the field, Kevin McKean says:

The problem arises when the right-brain movement implies that its conclusions are based on hard fact, rather than an essentially metaphorical interpretation of scientific discoveries. The differences between the hemispheres are still not well understood, and Gazzaniga, like Springer, says that the newest research tends to emphasize the way the two cooperate with one another during the normal functioning, rather than how they differ.³¹

McKean also says:

Scientists are understandably annoyed when they see careful but often inconclusive work popularized and exploited so glibly. As Deutsch puts it: “I get bothered by people saying, ‘This is all based on neurological theory, therefore it’s true.’ It’s not legitimized by neurological theory. **There is no evidence that people favor one portion of the brain or the other----that’s pure speculation.**”³² (Emphasis added.)

This same right-brain female/left-brain male nonsense is promoted by Dobson in an interview with Dr. Donald Joy. Smalley and Trent credit Joy as being the source of their right/left brain information. Joy is introduced as “a good friend and frequent visitor to Focus on the Family.” The title of the program is “The Innate Differences between Males and Females.” During the broadcast Joy promotes some of the same pseudoscience. Joy says:

The female brain is a brain that’s not damaged during fetal development as the male brain is. . . . The damage occurs to the male brain during the sixteenth to the twenty-sixth week of fetal development. At that time a chemical bath is given to the left hemisphere and the connecting link between the two hemispheres that reduces the size and number of transmission passages that exist there for what’s called lateral transmission. So males simply can’t talk to themselves across the hemispheres in a way that a woman does.³³

A similar statement is made by another one of Dobson’s favorites, H. Norman Wright, on a different Focus on the Family interview. Wright is a former pastor turned psychologist who packages and prolifically promotes psychology. In the interview Wright says:

One of the unique differences between men and women is that women use both sides of their brain at the same time because of the thousands of additional nerve connectors that are there. Men have to shift from one side of the brain to the other. They’re working out of the analytical, the left side, and if they have to move into the emotional area they drop that and move toward the right side. . . . Men tend to be single minded. They get involved in one thing. And women have more of a capability of juggling.³⁴

What Joy and Wright say is similar to what Smalley and Trent say:

The human brain is divided into two halves, or hemispheres, connected by fibrous tissue called the *corpus callosum*. The sex-related hormones and chemicals that flood a baby boy’s brain cause the right side to recede slightly, destroying some of the connecting fibers. One result is that, in most cases, a boy starts life more *left-brain* oriented.

Because little girls don’t experience this chemical bath, they leave the starting blocks much more two-sided in their thinking.³⁵

In contrast, researchers Dr. Melissa Hines and Dr. Roger Gorski, from the Department of Anatomy at the University of California at Los Angeles, say:

As is true of most behavioral and neural sex differences in people, sex differences in asymmetries are small. . . .

. . . sex differences in neural asymmetries appear to be very complex. One sex is not simply more lateralized than the other. Rather, males seem to be more lateralized than females in some respects;

females seem to be more lateralized than males in other respects; and the sexes seem to be equally lateralized in still other respects.³⁶

What has happened with Smalley and Trent, as well as with Joy and Wright, is that they dichotomize differences in a way that the research does **not** permit. Smalley, Trent, Joy, and Wright, with Dobson's support and advertising, promote the type of left-brain/right-brain popular pseudoscience that the researchers oppose. They claim differences that do not exist and they ignore overlapping distributions that do exist. The misinformation and disinformation by such popularizers of right-brain/left-brain mythology are a disservice to the church. Hemisphericity and gender differences are far more complex than the pseudo-pop-neurology propagated by Smalley, Trent, Joy, Wright, and Dobson.

Dobson's support of such error is one more link in the chain of his psychoheresy. Brain research and the results of research are in a constant state of flux. In reading the research, we see more **suggestions** of **possible** conclusions than assertions of actual conclusions, more "it appears as if" than "it is so" proclamations, as made by Smalley, Trent, Joy, Wright and Dobson.

Some feminists seem bent on proving that there are no differences. And, other popularizers of pseudoscience, such as Smalley, Trent, Joy, Wright, and Dobson, seem bent on propagating differences that have not been proven. Underlying their unjustifiable conclusions seems to be a female brain superiority which certainly appeals to the women who follow them.* While the research seems to support some differences, they are **not** the ones Smalley, Trent, Joy, Wright, and Dobson are promoting. Notice our expression "research seems." Whenever individuals speak with the certainty of these men in such an uncertain area, *caveat emptor!* (Buyer, beware!)

* Al Dager has written a *Media Spotlight Report* titled "Gary Smalley: The Psychology of Matriarchy." In the report Dager discusses Smalley and Trent's book *The Language of Love* as well as two of Smalley's books titled *If He Only Knew* and *For Better or for Best*. The Special Report is available upon request from Media Spotlight Ministries, P.O. Box 290, Redmond, WA 98073-0290.

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