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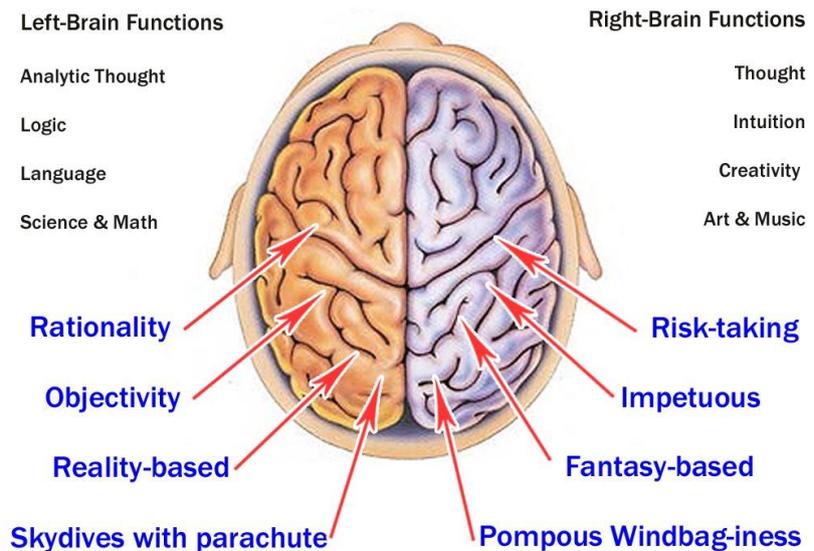
Right Brain, Left Brain

by Sara Tusek

Back in the 80's and 90's, pop psychology was all the rage. My favorite easy-read psychology magazine was *Psychology Today*. One of the many theories it explored was the idea that the human brain, which has two separate halves (hemispheres) joined by the corpus callosum, is divided in its approach to organizing information, solving problems and overall functioning.

This theory promised some new insights into what careers a person might succeed in, according to his or her brain dominance. It seemed to make sense and to explain the various strengths and preferences of different people. Just look at the brain:

Left and Right Brain Functions



It's not really color-coded like this sketch, nor are the areas so conveniently labeled, but the concept that brain functions are differentiated according to the side of the brain, and that most people favor one side over the other, became a popular concept. Right-brained people are cool and artistic, with strengths in creativity, visualization and intuition; left-brained people are boring bean-counters who love to make lists and iron their underwear.

Or, if you happen to favor the left brain, right-brained people are kooky, heedless and unreliable, while left-brained people will save the planet, with their serious scientific analysis and rational procedures.

The problem is, though, according to the June 2012 *Psychology Today*, the right-and-left brain theory is a myth, an oversimplification of how the brain really works. The myth, however, does contain some truth and may provide a helpful metaphor.

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Right brain, left brain (from p. 1)

Christian Jarrett, Ph.D, writes about the right brain, left brain theory of differentiation in *Psychology Today* (published June 27, 2012) as follows:

“There is more than a grain of truth to the left-brain right-brain myth. While they look alike, the two hemispheres of the brain do function differently.

For example, it’s become almost common knowledge that in most people the left brain is dominant for language. The right hemisphere, on the other hand, is implicated more strongly in emotional processing and representing the mental states of others.

However, the distinctions aren’t as clear cut as the myth makes out - for instance, the right hemisphere is involved in processing some aspects of language, such as intonation and emphasis”

Dr. Jarrett is, perhaps, simply being a good (left-brained) scientist by making sure that no one believes that one side of the brain completely dominates the other, singlehandedly and tyrannically making all decisions and providing the impetus for all behaviors. He goes on to say:

“But it’s important to remember that in healthy people the two brain hemispheres are well-connected. The fictional doctor Gregory House called the corpus callosum that joins the hemispheres the “George Washington Bridge” of the brain, and in most of what we do, the hemispheres have evolved to operate together, sharing information across this bridge. Neuroscientists working in this field today are interested in how this coordination occurs.

It’s also important to note that the kind of tasks that engage one hemisphere more than the other don’t always map neatly onto the kind of categories that we find useful to talk about in our everyday lives. Let’s take the example of creativity. We may find it a useful shorthand to divide tasks up into those that are creative and those that are repetitive.

But the reality of course is more complex. There are many ways to be creative.”

What, then, does this have to do with career development? In one way, the lack of proof for the right brain, left brain theory is bad news. Wouldn’t it be neat and tidy if career counselors could test their clients’ brain-side preference and then recommend careers accordingly? In fact, they have! Here’s just one example of an on-line test you can take to see if you should go to art school:

http://www.whererecreativitygoestoschool.com/vancouver/left_right/rb_test.htm

As Dr. Jarrett says, *“The left-brain right-brain myth will probably never die because it has become a powerful metaphor for different ways of thinking – logical, focused and analytic versus broad-minded and creative . . . I suppose the logical left-brain, creative right-brain myth has a seductive simplicity about it. People can ask – which kind of brain have I got? They can buy an app to target their weaker half. They can categorise languages and people as right-brained or left. It’s tricky to combat that belief system by saying the truth is really more complicated.”*

We have all figured out by now, I hope, that choosing a career is not simple, not clean and clear, and not really predictable. Most likely, the best use for the right brain, left brain theory (or the “party” theory, or the “introvert/extrovert” theory, for that matter) is as a metaphor, a non-literal way to think about something abstract and complex.



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