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Moving Beyond Affirmative Action for Men

Alice Silverberg

I joke that all of my higher education was at single-sex universities ... but unfortunately for a sex of which I'm not a member. The disparities between the way men and women were treated at those universities ranged from serious to laughable.

I grew up going to New York City public schools when they were unsafe and the city was verging on bankruptcy. Neither of my parents graduated from college, so my siblings and I had to learn for ourselves how to cope with the Ivy League and Seven Sisters colleges.

Harvard College didn't admit women to the Class of 1979 (even though that's the college I went to). The female students were all admitted by Radcliffe College. The Harvard/Radcliffe ratio at that time was 2.5 to 1 by fiat, having gotten there gradually from a ratio fixed at 4 to 1 a few years earlier. People have told me that affirmative action must have helped me get into Harvard. They don't realize that Harvard's affirmative action favored men and not women; discrimination against women was institutionalized.



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Our value was conveyed to us in trivial ways before we even started. With the acceptance letter, Harvard sent the boys a postage-paid envelope for their response, and a fancy certificate suitable for framing stating that they got into Harvard. The girls needed to put stamps on their response envelopes. While Princeton alumni joke that Princeton's Latin motto translates to "God went to Princeton," I joke that Radcliffe's Latin motto translates to "Radcliffe has no money."

The female students were known as "Radcliffe bitches." Some professors made it clear that they expected the men to go on to top graduate schools, while they expected the women to teach high school.

Harvard declared itself coeducational in 1999 [sic], but its 360-year legacy has a lingering impact, for example in faculty gender ratios. There were no female tenured mathematics professors in the Harvard, Cambridge, or Princeton math departments when I was a student there, or any time before. Neither Harvard nor Cambridge had any in the 20th century, and Princeton's first was in 1994.

Churchill College prides itself on being "the first of the formerly all-male Cambridge colleges to vote to admit women." It is less proud that it was the last Cambridge College to be founded as men-only (contrary to Sir Winston's wishes). Churchill College first admitted female undergraduates in 1972. The Master while I studied there in 1979–80 had voted against admitting women.

That women weren't welcome at Princeton, which went coeducational less than a decade before I applied to graduate school, was signaled in ways ranging from blatant to subtle. A group calling itself the "Concerned Alumni of Princeton" agitated to revoke coeducation. The ratio of men's rooms to women's rooms in the math building was 3.5 to 1. Some time after I graduated, someone who has been an AMS President told me that the reason there were no female students when he went to Princeton was that none were good enough to be admitted; he wasn't aware that women were barred.

I learned many things from my experiences. I learned that decisions that should be based on merit and fairness are often (subconsciously) instead based on empathy. This unfortunately leads to people favoring people who remind them of themselves, and people finding it hard to believe that those isomorphic to themselves can do bad things.

Something that helped me survive as a mathematician was that I'd rather listen than talk. Putting yourself in someone else's shoes is a useful game. Sitting around after dinner with other students (i.e., procrastinating instead of studying), we tried to figure out why we disagreed on something that

seemed obvious to each of us. We could usually trace our differences to our own experiences or our family's values (and our acceptance or rejection of them). This helped us to see that there can be more than one valid viewpoint. One learns more by listening than by speaking.

I try to have a sense of humor and to be bemused rather than angry or resentful (though I don't necessarily succeed at that), and I try to remember what's important and not get stressed about things that aren't. I try to view the world with a sense of adventure and an appreciation for the absurd. (It helps that I haven't yet figured out that I'm not Alice in Wonderland.) Mathematicians (and perhaps people in general) are a lot like children, with both the good and the bad that accompanies that. I'm eternally optimistic that, like children, they (we) have the capacity to learn and become better.

The mathematical community is a lot like a family. It's a collection of people, some difficult, some complicated, but to a large extent we care about each other.

References

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Alice Silverberg is a professor of mathematics and computer science at the University of California, Irvine. Her research areas are cryptography and number theory. She received her undergraduate degree summa cum laude from Harvard University, a master's of advanced studies degree from the University of Cambridge, and a master's degree and PhD from Princeton University. Before joining UCI she was a professor of mathematics at the Ohio State University. Alice has been awarded Humboldt, Sloan, IBM, Bunting, and National Science Foundation Fellowships, and she has held visiting positions at industrial labs and international research centers. She consulted for the TV show NUMB3RS and the documentary Julia Robinson and Hilbert's Tenth Problem, and occasionally writes mathematically-inspired Scottish country dances.