A Male's Experience of Being a Gender Minority

Oded Goldreich

During the academic year 2003-04 I had the great privilege of being a fellow at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study (at Harvard University). In this essay, I will confine myself to one aspect of that great experience: being a male in an academic institute that is directed by women and in which women are in large majority.

First, the basic statistics. During that period, the institute hosted 56 fellows, with a 48:8 proportion of women to men. The institute's four chief executives (the Institute's Dean, Program Director, and the Deans of Science and Sociology) were women.

The General Feeling: A Difference

The immediate effect of the aforementioned gender statistics was that the atmosphere at all meetings was very different from what I usually experience in academia. It started in the orientation meetings, which featured honest and warm welcome addresses of the institute's chief executives (rather than pompous and hierarchical addresses that one is used to getting from males in similar positions at other institutes).

But my focus will be on the atmosphere at the general meetings of the fellows. These meetings took place once or twice a week, and featured a professional presentation by one of the fellows followed by a Q&A session. I found these meetings fascinating, and was particularly impressed by the candid interest of the participants in the actual content of the discussion. This is particularly remarkable given the diversity of the fellows, who range from exact and natural scientists, to social and political scientists, to humanities scholars and artists. Needless to say, in the discussions, each person brought her/his own professional perspectives, but there was a candid attempt to listen and understand. In contrast, in a typical scientific colloquium, I often notice that most of the audience is not engaged: people just come because they feel that they have to, but they are often not really there.

Another feature of these meetings was the relatively rare display of personal agendas and ego issues. Furthermore (and/or consequently), verbal aggression and other displays of personal hostility were non-existent (with the exception of a single meeting hosting Harvard's President L. Summers...). In contrast, in a typical scientific colloquium, I often notice that the discussion is heated by hidden agendas, attempts to sound smart, and hostilities that have accumulated as a result of the former. I have always rejected the idea that aggressive behavior and overly personal agendas promote progress: personality-fueled aggression should not be confused with sharp and articulated issue-driven critique (very much as rape should not be confused with sex).

Indeed, the Radcliffe experience has provided a proof to my old beliefs: the discussions at Radcliffe often contained sharp and articulated issue-driven critique, but these seemed to benefit everybody because they did not come across as being aggressive (since they seem not to be fueled by hidden agendas or attempts to sound smart).

One should note that the aforementioned Radcliffe experience differs from the typical academic setting in three aspects. Firstly, as noted upfront, the gender statistics are reversed. Secondly, this is a fellowship program rather than a university department at which various resources are at stake, causing numerous confrontations. And, finally, the group of fellows is more diverse, allowing most fellows a feeling of their own professional space (unshared and unchallenged by peer experts).

I would like to start my analysis by noting that the last aspect is not really valid with respect to most fellows. Even ignoring the two clusters (groups of 3-6 fellows from the same discipline gathered to interact), there was a significant overlap between the areas of expertise, and indeed numerous comments arising from this reality were made. In addition, as noted above, the diversity could have had a negative effect of discouraging interaction between fellows, but this did not happen.

Regarding the other two aspects (and actually regarding all three if one remains skeptic of my foregoing argument), one may indeed try to conduct extensive studies to determine which of them is responsible for the different atmosphere (and, for a start, confirm my claim regarding this difference). Lacking the resources for such a study, I made a mental experiment instead: I asked myself how a typical university department would feel if the gender statistics were similar to those at Radcliffe. I also asked myself how Radcliffe would feel if the current fellows were to negotiate the distribution of standard academic resources as in a standard university department. My own conclusion is that the effect of the gender statistics was at least of the same order of magnitude as the effect of Radcliffe not being a university department.

The Personal Angle: Awareness of Being a Gender Minority

A more personal aspect of the gender statistics was my own feeling of being aware that I am a male in academic meetings in which a vast majority of the attendees and speakers were women. Occasionally, I became aware of this gender situation, which needless to say is an unusual one. At these times I asked myself why I was aware of the gender proportions at this setting, whereas I was rarely aware of gender proportions at other settings (where men are in majority). The answer is, of course, obvious: the minority is always more self-conscious. But do we give sufficient weight to the cost of such self-consciousness (that is, to its distracting effect, which translates to sub-optimal performance)?

Some people believe that “minorities try harder,” and thus that being a member of a minority group pushes people to try to excel. This dynamic can work provided that there is no overall bias against the minority group in the relevant setting. Consider, for example, the case of Jews in 19th century Europe or in early 20th century U.S. Indeed, there were official restrictions against them, and some members of the academy had anti-Jewish dispositions, but there were sufficiently many people in the academic world that did not have anti-Jewish dispositions. Furthermore, common stereotypes regarding Jews did not include a belief in their intellectual inferiority. In contrast, consider the situation of women in academia in the U.S. in the 1980s and

1990s (and even today). Don't you know researchers in your discipline who believe that women cannot do certain things or achieve certain levels? And what about African-Americans? Furthermore, for a negative effect, it is not necessary that these beliefs exist or that they are common—it suffices that the member of the minority perceives them as existing.

I am ignoring the effect of direct (open or hidden) discrimination, and asking about the effect of perceived expectations and beliefs on the performance of a minority member. I am drawing on my own experience at Radcliffe, on being aware at times of my being a minority, and of fearing that what I think or want to say may be perceived as gender stereotyping. These thoughts (or fears) have caused me to waste "thought cycles" (that is, to be distracted) and thus perform sub-optimally at times, but this negative effect was greatly reduced by the positive attitude that I sensed from the majority group. Still, extrapolating from that experience, I asked myself how a female student feels in a Science class, where she is part of a conspicuous gender minority. As I argue next, I believe she is likely to be distracted several orders of magnitude more than I was.

I wish to stress that there is a huge difference between my experience of being a minority at Radcliffe and the experience of women as a minority in the general academic environment and more so in Exact Sciences. After all, I felt a minority in one setting, while my entire professional upbringing as well as the current academic setting in general is one in which I am not in a minority. How threatened can one feel as a minority in one setting, given that one is not in minority in all other relative settings? Furthermore, the common gender stereotypes against men are rather mild; they may attribute to male features such as aggression, emotional superficiality, etc, but not intellectual inferiority. In contrast, think of a female scientist who is a minority in any setting she encounters, from the special Science classes at early age, through undergraduate and graduate school, to being a junior and senior member of a university department.

My self-consciousness (to being a minority) made me more conscious of other minorities, and in particular of the African-American Radcliffe fellows. In their behavior, I seem to have noticed their self-consciousness to being a small minority among whites, which is a feeling that they must cope with daily in the academy. For them, as far as being a minority is concerned, Radcliffe did not offer a different experience.

Discussion

Firstly, I'd like to mention that, although my permanent affiliation is with the Weizmann Institute in Israel, I have spent approximately eight years of my post-doctoral life in U.S. institutes. In any case, my statements regarding gender issues refer to the situation in the U.S., and indeed in Israel one may encounter more open demonstrations of gender biases.

Secondly, as noted by Salil Vadhan (a Science co-fellow at Radcliffe), another difference between Radcliffe and my standard academic environment is that the former had a mix of sciences and humanities whereas the latter is confined to a discipline of Exact Sciences. The underlying assumption here is that the atmosphere in the humanities is different than the one in

exact sciences. Assuming that the atmosphere in different disciplines is different, I would attribute this difference to the difference in the sociology of these disciplines and not to the "nature" of the disciplines themselves. Needless to say, I believe that gender proportions are highly correlated with the sociology of a discipline. A certain type of male-dominance produces a certain atmosphere...

Lastly, as noted by Londa Schiebinger, the two main sections of my essay provide some mirror image of the common situation (with respect to gender and academia). In particular, it is interesting to confront my account of the atmosphere at Radcliffe with Meg Urry's account (to appear in "Gendered Innovations in the Sciences") of the atmosphere in Physics and Astronomy. Urry focuses on the dominant role of “chest beating” and aggression in the culture of Physics, and points to the impact of this unpleasant atmosphere on female scientists. I would like to add that I share Urry's dislike of that type of culture, and am happy that things are not that bad in my own discipline. Still, Radcliffe provided me with a glance at how an ideal academic culture could look: the focus would be on the issues and not on various types of self-promotion and other personal agendas. Different gender proportions seem related to that.

Turning to my speculations regarding the distracting effect of self-awareness to belonging to a gender minority, I was happy to find a theoretical articulation as well as supporting experimental evidence in Claude Steele's (1997) work. Steele calls this phenomenon a “stereotype threat” (or the fear of fitting a negative stereotype regarding one's group), and explains how it disrupts performance especially in challenging situations. He points out not only the immediate effect of such disruption (that is, noticeably lower performance in comparison to abilities), but also the accumulated effect of reducing “academic identification” which in turn is crucial for success in the learning process. Needless to say, Steele's theory seems to apply at least as well to the research setting.