

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF INSTITUTIONAL SEXISM: Discrimination Against Women By Women

This narrative account reports an instance of discrimination against women in admission to a Graduate Social Work program and the subsequent correction of this unintended institutional sexism.

By Theodore Ernst

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Near the end of the first year that I served as Director of a Masters of Social Work program at a Midwestern university, it routinely became necessary to administer Oral Comprehensive Examinations for second year MSW students about to graduate. Unfortunately, the particulars concerning the administration of these examinations were anything but routine; adverse is a better description.

I learned that shortly before I became Director, the Graduate School voted to eliminate the Oral Comprehensive Examination requirement for all classes after that year. The graduating MSW students were well aware of this decision and were not at all happy with the fact that they would be the last class required to negotiate this final hurdle. They quite naturally viewed this as totally unnecessary in view of the decision by the graduate school.

Worse, I learned, too, that the committees conducting these examinations had to be chaired by a social work faculty member who held official Graduate Faculty status. This status meant that its holders were eligible to chair or sit on doctoral dissertation committees, of no relevance whatsoever to the

MSW program. The only other social work faculty who held this status were both in their last year before retirement. I really did not want to subject either of them to these angry students. I decided that I would chair all these examination committees, forty-seven to be exact, equally divided between men and women, twenty-three men and twenty-four women.

The examinations were scheduled over a two week period. Each committee consisted of two other social work faculty and myself as chair. A young Ph.D. clinical psychologist that taught the first year Human Behavior and the Social Environment course volunteered to serve on as many of these committees as necessary. All students were examined from the same list of questions.

Because I usually teach first year policy and services courses, I had not had many of these second year students in class. Most of them I knew only casually. But at the end of the first week of examinations — 23 or 24 examinations equally divided between men and women — I had one overwhelming impression: the graduating women students collectively were clearly more competent, more intelligent than were the men. I asked the clinical



psychologist who had been with me in most of these examinations whether he had any impression about the performances of men students and women students respectively. His answer was something like, "I didn't want to say anything, but the men are dumb!" My own impression was that they were "Kelly Bundy" dumb. On the television sitcom, "Married With Children", Kelly's brother Bud pegs her intelligence somewhere between that of an ashtray and a pickle jar.

It was late on a Friday afternoon, but on a hunch I asked the student assistant who helped with admission matters to compute the mean undergraduate Grade Point Average (GPA) for the graduating men and women. This was an easy task; these undergraduate GPA's were recorded on the outside of their student folders. Who knows why?

The difference in GPA for this class was almost 0.6 on a 4.0 scale favoring the women! We quickly did the same for the first year students and for those admitted for the coming year. These difference were respectively 0.4 and 0.5 favoring the women — all statistically significant, at the .05 level.

As the few faculty who were still around on a Friday afternoon were discussing these interesting findings, I took a phone call from an applicant for the following year. By sheer coincidence, her folder was on my desk with the decision of the School's Admission Committee

waiting for my signature. This young woman had an undergraduate Grade Point Average of 3.9 at a small Catholic liberal arts college in the East, some appropriate volunteer experience, excellent references, and a fine autobiographical statement. The Admission Committee decision was not to accept her at this time and to recommend that she seek employment in the field and to reapply next year!

Parenthetically, I have always been politically incorrect and a minority among my colleagues in regard to previous work experience in the field of social work as a desirable characteristic for entering MSW students. As often as not such students have so much to unlearn that it offsets any advantage of previous experience. Further, I find it inconceivable that social work is so unique as to prefer, indeed, sometimes require, previous experience. If law schools told prospective attorneys they should work in the field before attending law school, most of us would be in jail. If medical schools told prospective physicians and surgeons they should practice for a few years before attending medical school, most of us would be dead.

At any rate, at that time, through some misguided sense of democratic governance, I did not reverse decisions of the Admission Committee. I conveyed the committee's decision to this applicant. Something in my voice obviously indicated to her that I was not happy

with the decision because she said, "Don't feel bad, Dr. Ernst. The other four schools that I applied to all accepted me." I asked her why in the world she had applied to this particular school. It turned out her boyfriend had been accepted by our university's clinical psychology doctoral program.

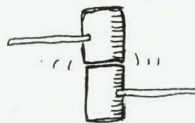
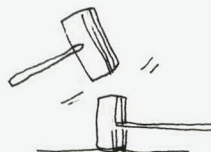
I began talking with the four or five members of the school's Admissions Committee, all women except for one very junior male faculty member. There was no strict numerical formula or ranking system for applicants in place. The Admissions policy was that decisions were based on the GPA, references, evaluation of previous experience, an autobiographical statement, and an interview (the latter for almost all local applicants, but not absolutely required and only rarely conducted for applicants from a distance). None of these variables were weighted.

It became obvious to me that these interviews were chiefly screening in young men with prior experience (typically in public welfare or corrections). Comfortable in the interview, they seemed "committed to the field". Frequently they had low undergraduate GPA's, some in the 2.0000001 range, achieved through a Physical Education elective during the summer following the June in which they should have graduated. The interviewers became their advocates. These same interviews (or lack thereof) were just as effectively screening out bright, promising young women without prior experience and/or

who may not have been as comfortable in the actual interview situation as were the young men.

A little more exploration revealed that this school's applicant pool had consistently been about 3:1 women to men, but actual admissions were very close to 1:1. To be blunt, male applicants had far better odds of being admitted than did female — a fact which had never before been noticed in this school which prided itself on the high proportion of men in its student body!

The following year, using the undergraduate GPA as one major cutoff factor in screening applicants, the entering class was 3:1 female, reflecting the same ratio as existed among applicants — and thereby ending this unintended discrimination against women that had largely been perpetuated by women. □



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