

Reading seminar on *An Inclusive Academy*

Notes from Week 5

Topics/Questions to Keep in Mind

- Facts or ideas you found Surprising, Interesting, or Troubling (SIT)
- Anything you didn't get to bring up last week.
- On page 97, the authors begin to talk about how moral licensing can affect how individuals evaluate others. How can we try to mitigate these effects in making decisions about applications, etc.?
- On page 98, the authors discuss how Whites view the term "Black" more negatively than "African American". Did this surprise you?
- What did you think of the study presented on page 100 that indicated that Whites are perceived as having earned their success more than African Americans, even when identical language was used to describe their successes?
- Many individuals take a "colorblind" approach to race and ethnicity. On page 101 the authors begin to discuss some of the many drawbacks of this viewpoint. If you are White, were you surprised that underrepresented groups generally prefer to have their differences acknowledged (as opposed to the "colorblind" approach)?
- Were you surprised by the huge effect of a 1% hiring bias in the simulation discussed on page 104?

Recap from Discussion

Key topics/points discussed

- Having an introductory letter for classes.
- The Matthew effect.
- Colorblindness and the importance of identity groups.
- A followup on the GRE discussion from last week.

Notes

On an introductory letter for classes

- Malcah's Draft Introductory Letter:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1C057uox8R-Lf_YLpvK1E27rMG4eCbmnob14YWiYOSJQ/edit
- Some ideas/questions about the letter (partially from [WRaP](#) group):
 - Would students be happy to fill it in? Others may be shy, reserved, uncomfortable filling it in.
 - How to make it student-driven.
 - Balance of power: asking students to reveal information without reciprocating is quite imbalanced. There has to be a letter from the instructor to the student as well.
 - Should the instructor write first, or as a reply?
 - Could be good for the instructor to do the personal work first.
 - It should be a writer's choice about what to include, etc. Individual perception of identity, etc.
 - Seems better than beginning of class survey (used in CI-Ms)
- Worry about the letter: students who aren't interested see it as a hassle rather than something they'd take seriously.
 - People interpret the question "what's your background?" very differently.
 - Whites vs. non-Whites may write very different letters.
 - People from math olympiad background could take as a joke.
 - Reason to focus on student-to-instructor. Can't see what others did/compare to other people
- Undergrad perspective: would be really nice, make professors more approachable
- Faculty intros shouldn't just focus on academics. Even something as simple as "I like to go on bikes in my free time" is really helpful to include.
- A letter might help with online format.
- Many thought that faculty should also write a letter of introduction and that it is probably easier/more inviting if the instructor writes it first.
 - Might help with people who don't feel comfortable revealing too much.
- The letter can help create safe space for students, triggers, etc.
- Is there a format where students can all see each other's answers?
 - Could have one letter written for other students, and one letter for the instructor.
 - Could have students introduce themselves to a classmate, then have the classmate introduce the student everyone else. Sometimes this is done in 18.821.
- The letter should be seen as the beginning of a dialogue.
- Reception is a function of how you present yourself in the class. How genuine creating the access points is to you.

- Context very important. Just mentioning it offhand at the end of a rapid overview of a subject would indicate to the students that the instructor doesn't care about the letter.
- Tying back to book: schemas also work in the reverse direction. People in underrepresented groups have different schemas about people in positions of power.
 - There may be a certain amount of suspicion that an effort might not actually have such good intentions.
- The culture doesn't currently incentivize these things. Well-intentioned efforts have to overcome a large amount of distrust.
 - Many frustrations about people in positions of power trying things and not working; have to combat with overcoming large hurdles first.
 - Happens also elsewhere (e.g., various communities + healthcare)
- Need to start taking first steps. Need to think from both directions. If there's an issue of trust, what kinds of things can we do to combat this?
 - Came to mind: South Africa truth and reconciliation. (Definitely not perfect). Worthwhile to hear what kinds of things can be done.
 - What can be done to help the student "take the olive branch"? What does it look like to help try to rebuild trust in both directions.

The Matthew effect

- Many were particularly struck by the Matthew Effect
- Happens a lot on prize committees; a small number of superstars gather a lot of attention and acclaim.
 - Not specific to mathematicians, happens with songs if you make the information available to them.
 - Easier to give a piece of work a prize where the impact has been clearly recognized (by a previous prize).
 - The faculty often see that always the same people get prizes. In particular, people get multiple prizes for a single line of research.
- Combined with 1% accumulation, can be very detrimental.
- Not sure of solution
- From an undergrad perspective, the cultural divide between competition math people/noncompetition people seems to largely be a product of the Matthew effect.
 - It seems that there is a problem recognizing that other people have value.

Identity Groups

- The paragraph about how it's important for underrepresented people to recognize that there are differences was compelling.
- Many anecdotes where people try to bring these differences up and are not heard

- Example from math dept: president of USWIM. Conversation about supporting other groups, e.g., Black in math. Suggested putting out a message asking if someone was interested in starting club, then department would be willing to fund it. Message that went out was unspecific “we’d be willing to support a group”
- On mind: recognition + belonging in groups. Has been on the edges of discussions, but not really surfaced. In chapter as well.
 - Spend a lot of time discussing entry/transition points, but interested in understanding the experience of underrep. Groups in math, at MIT, in conversation. What can we address/improve?
- A “Black in math group” is currently being created. Have received department/SoS funding.
 - Creators specifically didn’t want to publicize it at that point because they didn’t want it to be the focus of the discussion
 - 2 visiting professors in January, next September will be part of group (both would be here this fall if it were not for the pandemic).
- Important to make it clear support is specifically there for a particular group
- Many things that go on behind the scenes. Need to know what works for undergraduates so the faculty/staff can team up
 - Can feel awkward to say you want to create group without an individual who is interested.
- The activity of various clubs, etc. has varied a lot over the years. Now the math groups seem to be less active than during previous years.
- Clarifying point about messaging about supporting specific groups: would be awkward for department to say “form this specific group”, better to have a longstanding note up saying “we’re willing to find these things”
 - Drawing back to reading: specifically recognize that there are differences in people’s identity.

Colorblindness

- Interesting in light of conversation today: idea of colorblindness & meritocracy. “What matters the most is getting the best people.” This section does a good job of showing why that’s not true.
 - There is no absolute “talent” etc. irrespective of gender/race/etc.
 - Really worth discussing.
- Perspective from underrepresented groups: interview of MIT students from the 90’s about race:
 - <https://diversity.mit.edu/resources/it%E2%80%99s-intuitively-obvious-videos>
 - Would go to office hours, etc. and TAs/Profs would say they should be happy with a B-, etc. didn’t help them strive to do better.
 - Important to recognize what we’re talking about

- Note: the term “Identity group” may seem colorblind. Important to understand how the way “colorblind” is used in the book. Evaluating things in a “colorblind” way is evaluating things on a white standard.
- A lot of what’s the book is saying about colorblindness is that is is about not acknowledging different starting points

Follow up on GRE from last week

- Peter sent Michel summary of points made last week + a few additional points over the weekend.
- Shared with graduate committee and had an initial discussion. The graduate committee is taking it from here.
 - Some comments that were made similar to Henry’s comment that the GRE could help some applications (esp. from small colleges, etc.).
- The site used for grad applications has a record from last 10–12 years or so. We’re going back through admissions data to see whether or not the GRE had that role.
- This summer has been very busy, and it will take a little while to make a decision.
 - The graduate committee needs time to do research on the decision and present it to the faculty.
 - All of the faculty need to vote on the decision.
- Questions on GRE:
 - Sometimes helps applicants with stellar grades, letters, etc. from unknown place/recommenders. Would such applications be thrown out?
 - First things looked at: statement of purpose, subjects taken, letters fo recommendation.
 - Hard to assess applications with no reference point. Sometimes accepted students who actually had no mathematical background Not necessarily rejecting people from underrepresented groups.
 - Would asking for more details about coursework fill the gap? Can we figure out what the coursework and background of the unknown schools are?
 - Often not only what we get at application is what we look at. Might call person at institution/might call person who knows university system in that country. If student has done research in area we don’t understand, call someone from that area.
- For rising seniors, the GRE issue is a pretty pressing issue. An in-person test happening in September. Have to put self at health risk.
 - This is a key year for this decision.
 - GRE is pressing, but not going to affect how to pay people next month, how to get people on campus, etc. For example, the budget has shrunk, but nobody can be let go.
 - Worth MIT taking the time to do the necessary research to make the decision.

- Maybe the undergraduate students could be directed to the faculty committee dealing with the GRE instead of continuing this discussion here?
- Questions about GRE are not necessarily math specific. Other departments are considering this. Maybe it is useful to discuss with other departments?
 - The department heads in the School of Science discuss these issues on a daily basis.

Other points brought up

- Non-native English speakers are often surprised by the difference between the terms “Black” and “African American”
 - When Michel started speaking English, he only learned about the term “Black”.
 - Always a bit unsure which is the right term to be using.
- Surprising: in the paragraph about “When Leaders Fail” if the leader is from an underrepresented group, people often blame it on the group, rather than the individual.
 - Surprised that people didn’t attribute it to the bias against the person.
- Expected the women/men white/people of color sentence would lead to saying that not all people are in those categories.
 - Feels very conspicuous that certain groups are not well-represented in this chapter. Have to pay attention to.
 - Just because it is harder to gather data, doesn’t mean we shouldn’t pay attention to it.
 - How research works: make incremental steps, then notice the gaps. Our jobs to do the research to fill in the gaps. See these gaps as a space to be filled in. Do we have the data to see the argument as persuasive?
- Interesting: White men are more likely to be perceived of being successful because of their work, but also perceived as having talent
- The NSF is really bad at including people in demographic information.
 - Often the only options for gender are “male” or “female”. Options for racial/ethnic groups are very limited and don’t work for multi-racial people.
 - Dropdown boxes are really bad! The recent census had an open question.
 - Drew’s recent conference chose not to collect demographic information because of this.
- Meta comment: the conversation has not been very focused on the reading. Have had important discussions on UROPs, etc. Might make more sense for people to talk about what’s at hand and can reserve questions for other meetings?

Concrete actions that we are taking

- Last time we brought up having grad students have undergrads applying for grad school help them in applications. Sarah G. would be interested in arranging it.

- Sarah G., Araminta, and Peter have since met about this and are starting to work on it.
- Malcah has created a template introductory letter for courses (and is doing work on how to implement the letter). We discussed some suggestions, and she is interested in suggestions/help from those interested.