

Reading seminar on *An Inclusive Academy*

Notes from Week 7

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.
- This is just a reminder that the seventh meeting for the reading group on An Inclusive Academy will occur today at 8pm.
- This section of the text presents seven alternate accounts of slower progress and lower salaries of women and people of color. Can you think of any other alternate accounts that you see used? In what ways might these alternate accounts be flawed?
- Are there situations in which you have observed individuals use any of these accounts (particularly, at MIT)?
- What are some things that we can do as a community to help debunk the myths of some of these accounts?
- On page 148, the authors discuss how male and female managers in the energy and healthcare industries reported equal numbers of opportunities, but men received more challenging opportunities at higher rates than women (even though both groups are equally interested in challenging opportunities). This can serve to deny women the challenges that might make them more competitive for higher level jobs. How can we counteract this tendency? (This is related to the lowered expectations that individuals from diverse groups often face and is discussed in some of the interviews of MIT students in the mid-90s as part of the [It's Intuitively Obvious](#) video series.)
- How can we address some of the many challenges around negotiating that the authors bring up in the reading?

Recap from Discussion

Key topics/points discussed

- Undergraduate advising.
- How the Seven Accounts arise in MIT Math.

Recap from Discussion in Breakout Room 1

Initial thoughts

- Some expressed skepticism around the model of citing studies.
 - Seems like most beliefs are not informed by studies.
 - Might not play a role in convincing either way.
 - Agree with 7 accounts anyhow.
- Interesting: section about interest.
 - Interest is not innate and immutable.
 - A lot of relevance to MIT math.
 - Made the point very well.
 - Interesting to see how much can influence personal preferences.
 - The authors say that the data are not super solid for ability and interests. How does one get more solid data/perform these studies? How much does treatment affect personal taste?
- Interested in theories of change: how can change happen? Who needs to be involved? Where should resources come from?
- Found section frustrating in that they went through all 7 and didn't come down to any explanation
- In Drew's experience: there doesn't seem to be any difference in productivity and interest. But that might be because people who stick around are most productive and interested.
- Seems to be an interplay between difficulty in creating a welcoming field and having few examples/role models.
 - One issue came up in day of dialogue: no point in recruiting new people if they're gonna feel unwelcome and leave.
- Some were confused by the Seven Accounts.
 - After re-reading seemed like the first half of chapter/book, differences are result of the accumulation of (dis)advantage.
 - A [short video of Virginia Valian on the accumulation of advantage.](#)
- Can be problematic for students to have PhD advisors that aren't accessible/encouraging.
 - The "My coach was hard on me, so I should be hard on you" approach produces a competitive outcome.
 - Advisees may be more likely to train their students in the same way as they were trained by their advisor. This can be very negative.
 - Maybe we could use a metric that tracks retention to try to see the effects of poor advising?
 - Important to note that in some fields, like CS, staying in academia is not necessarily viewed as success.
 - Interesting: "tough love" as a mentor vs. explicit exclusion/making feel like they don't belong.

- In light of Chapter 4/first part of book. Worth acknowledging where the department has experienced some of these faults. Necessary to figure out where problems are in order to come up with solutions.

On undergrad advising

- The advising situation for undergrads in the math dept. isn't particularly good. While there are some excellent advisors, many advisors do not provide much interest or support.
 - It is important to note that no MIT department has great advising.
- Sometimes hard for advisors to meet with students
- Some common problems from the perspective of students:
 - Some students have advisors who never responded to e-mails (not even once).
 - Many advisors don't seem to respond well to questions about UROPs.
 - Many non-present advisors.
 - If an advisor isn't responsive or helpful, it doesn't seem like there's anyone to bring these issues up to.
 - Have a 3rd party to go to
 - Double major: got advisor last year. Postdoc; great but knows almost nothing about undergrad courses
 - Many different sources of support. Might not frame the question as a bond with the advisor.
- How much accountability do advisors have?
- Would be worth having a town-hall type thing about advising in course 18. Many undergrads have opinions about this. Good to see what best form of advising would be. Identify a couple of starting points to improve, break up to town hall.
- What do advisors need?
 - Most people might not know it is even a part of their job
 - Sometimes students expect their advisor to know all MIT rules/regulations, but esp. new faculty might not know those details. Faculty advisors might not even know what the role is.
 - Main role of the advisor is to be someone who is in the student's court (advocate). The advisor can still do that without knowing every rule. This doesn't seem to be a message that's really communicated
- How many resources/training are advisors given?
 - Orientation: for departmental advising there's a day, but not obligatory.
- Many questions (e.g., responding to e-mails at least once) seem to come down to "does the advisor treat the advisee as a human being"?
 - Really bad: "if you're smart enough you don't have to be a good person"
 - Reason why high level classes have an off putting vibe.
 - Comes back to creating a good department culture as a whole.

Recap from Discussion in Breakout Room 2

Initial thoughts from the reading

- From previous week's reading, table 4.6 suggests that math is particularly bad about gender parity.
- In cishet nuclear households, women do more housework than men. this causes a problem
- Salary increases could be tied to receiving outside offers, which sounds good in theory but in practice this depends on someone's ability to feasibly accept outside offers (e.g. can they move locations?).
 - Typically in cishet relationships the wife is expected to move for the husband but not so much the other way around
- Nothing in the reading was surprising but one thing was funny: "both men and women sabotage peers who excel in areas not typical for their sex" (p. 147).
- Reading focused mostly on (presumably cis, binary) gender differences. would be interested in seeing data about other axes to get a broader, more intersectional view
 - These narratives are interconnected. Different fields have different gender stereotypes.

How are these issues reflected in mit experiences?

- Rutgers: observed disparities in distribution of responsibilities like service roles, committees, also non-academic things like organizing coffee hour
- At MIT: diversity committee (currently) is primarily women/minorities. Not representative sample of a mostly white (and Asian) male department.
- See also "truth values" play about female grad students being asked to get coffee, organize tea with mathematicians by male math professor for himself and some other male grad students.
- Recently: prof of higher-level math class referring to students as "sir"/"men" despite the presence of some women.
- Gendered expectations are generally false but still exist. Can be difficult to tell when something has happened.

How much does differential interest affect/explain things?

- What you're told you can/can't/should do has a huge effect on what your interest is, often falling along demographic lines.
- "Interest" includes both academic interests and a sense of what kind of work is worth doing (moral obligations, in some sense), and finances/feasibility aside is the main factor in people's career decision-making. It is not an immutable phenomenon and is primarily shaped by bias/discrimination, but it is a very significant factor.

- Different academic communities may want people to keep an open mind and explore to different extents.
 - Different subfields may be gendered based on "hardcoreness," type of research approach, etc.: huge gender disparities.
- Arrogance/unwelcoming environment from others can put people off in a way that interacts with gender stereotypes, school prestige, etc.
- Undergrad perspectives:
 - Started out in science, fell in love with math at MIT, now studying math/chem jointly but having more misgivings about elitism/lack of DEI in the field, and whether passion for math is enough to justify dealing with those additional issues for the rest of one's life (math seems less willing to fix these things than some other fields).
 - Have done math for a while but always felt like an outsider. Some amount of tracking involved in terms of inertia of studying math. Wondering about how much the culture of a field affects the kind of work one does.
 - Afraid of studying math but doing it anyway.

Notes from Discussion after Returning from Breakout Rooms

Undergrad Advising

- What incentives/consequences are there for good/bad advising?
 - Good advisors end up being oversubscribed
- One thing that might help: some discussion about what the role of an advisor is. What the advisor/student relationship should be
 - Some want little, some want a lot. What they want is particular to each case.
- Paul likes the idea of establishing what student's expectations are
- What would be a way to clarify this?
- There's a model for this: postdoc mentorship
- There is advisor training, but maybe not sufficient.
- No set way to see what advisee wants
- "Mentoring plan"
- Training focuses on academic rules + regulations
- Maybe the dept can send out a form to newly declared majors to collect information about how much interaction with advisor they want, what kind, other preferences, anything else they want advisor to know, etc., to be sent to advisor before their first official meeting?
 - Individual advisors can request this over e-mail, but a departmental form would help make the math advising experience more uniform.
 - Also maybe a webpage that gives some examples of advisor/advisee relationships. Undergrads might not know what relationship they need, so this seems essential!
- Reg day feels like a rushed experience. Cultivates high-pressure attitude.
- Conversation start before reg day
- Another important distinction between advisor/advisee relationships is whether the advisee is considering graduate school. This is of course not something people necessarily know early on but it's worth at least considering as another specification on this form.
- Is there a minimal amount of time advisors are required to at least offer?
 - Yes: something along the lines of a meeting around reg day to register for classes, and a meeting halfway through the semester to check progress.
 - This doesn't always happen though because it's up to the advisor/advisee pair to schedule meetings.
- It would be great to have a town hall/larger place for conversation about advising.