

Cumulative Effects of Apparently Small Events

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The 2002 *Reports of the Committees on the Status of Women Faculty* tell us “Generic issues that differentially impact the professional lives of female vs male faculty are: marginalization . . . isolation . . . residual effects of past inequities . . . and greater family responsibilities.”

My experience affirms these reports. I have been an ombudsperson for almost 30 years, listening to hundreds of men and women a year. I have also read most of the reports written about people of color and white women at MIT during these years, as well as literature on what happens to people who are “different” in any traditional setting. The findings of the gender equity reports are robust. Several reports about different cohorts of women and men at MIT (faculty, students, alums) have concluded that women and men seem randomly, equally able – but women on the average report paying a higher “price” for equal achievement. It could of course be the case that some people who are “different,” in a traditional environment, just make

hard work of the path to success. But I have seen so much evidence for the potential for marginalization that I believe in it.

By the end of my first year here, in 1973, I had come to the hypothesis that subtle discrimination is the principal scaffolding for unequal opportunity in the U.S., at least in decent and honorable institutions where egregious racism and sexism are now rare. The scaffolding, as I see it, is mainly composed of apparently small events, “micro-inequities,” ephemeral, hard to prove, often completely unintentional, often unrecognized. We see these small events if people are treated differently – as may happen with Caucasians in traditional Asian milieux and brown-skinned persons in white groups. We see micro-inequities with respect to religion, sexual orientation, color, ethnic dress, age, race and gender – for example, where schedules do not easily accommodate family responsibilities or prayers throughout the day.

Micro-inequities are especially problematic because they are focused

on one spot – and are focused on an element of identity that cannot be changed. (As one drop of water would ordinarily do no damage, continuous drops in the same place may be destructive.) I think micro events can do damage both by weakening opportunities for the person of difference and by making that person less self-confident. And these effects are often cumulative. Over the years I have sketched out dozens of hypotheses about how minutiae, taken together, can maintain barriers, and why small injuries and oversights may do differential damage to white women and to people of color at MIT. (You are welcome to these hypotheses if you are interested.)

Many people think it helps to talk about marginalization, for each person to reflect about what we can do for ourselves and for others – and for each of us to strive for top achievement on our chosen path, however gritty the way. Plainly it also helps for us to make these efforts together, as in the *Reports* of 2002. ♣
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