**Confronting Institutional and Structural Inequities in Computing and Academia**

Organizations such as CRA celebrate the achievements of women in computing and provide concrete opportunities for funding, mentoring, and recruiting them. The field of computing now extends well beyond computer science and provides opportunities in new fields, such as design, policy, and user research, just to name a few. We are told that this is a great time for women to study computing because there are so many jobs to be had. Yet we are still underrepresented in the field, especially at higher institutional levels. Why? “The diversity problem” is not just one of numbers (or lack thereof). I argue that it is about our institutions themselves and what they expect of us.

I recently reread an essay I first encountered in graduate school. In her classic 1991 essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”. Peggy McIntosh lists the benefits that being white gives her, a list of 26 certainties and privileges she has just by being white. Although McIntosh was discussing race, her implications obviously hold for gender. I was struck by the realization that there is still too little discussion of two vital topics in academic (and computing) life: invisible privilege and structural inequity. In this brief essay, I will offer some reflections on both.

As a social scientist, I am trained to focus on the institutional, social, and political dimensions of whatever I study. But none of us can afford to ignore these dimensions of our work. We can’t afford to think about men/women, life with partner/life without, partnered/single, and most of all, the mythical “work-life balance”, just as individual issues. Instead, we should ask ourselves how they reflect and perhaps shape our broader concerns. In my own case, personal circumstances and experiences have indeed shaped how I think about privilege and institutions now, but so have the institutions where I have worked and studied. Ageing (my own and that of my family’s), health challenges (ditto), an international move (in July 2011, I moved from the Midwest of the U.S. and joined the faculty of the School of Information and Library Studies of the University College Dublin, Ireland), and a wider circle of friends and colleagues suggest to me that there is still a great deal to talk about.

Yes, I can share more than 20 years of experiencing and listening and watching. Female students wonder why their male PhD classmates receive more plum research assistantships while they receive less prestigious TAships) Female colleagues question why they are receiving lower salaries than their male colleagues and ask why they receive more or more onerous (and often invisible) service and teaching assignments than their male colleagues. Some of them find themselves on the receiving end of subtle (or not) expectations for taking parental leave or being partnered, expectations that they cannot fight without significant political blowback. Women who question the distribution of resources or higher expectations for themselves have told me of marginalization in their institutions for speaking up. Still others question inequitable hiring, pay, promotion, and tenure while enduring other kinds of bias (against disability or even being single, to name a few). None of these show up – indeed, they are explained away and ignored – when we focus on diversity as an “increasing numbers” activity and diminish the privilege and institutional getting in the way.

But it’s not just me, of course. There is some research that suggests gender-appropriate behavior is enforced via social arrangements and interactions at work (Marshall and Taniguchi, 2011; Ely and Padavic, 2007; Wayne and Cordeiro, 2003). That men and women are treated differently with respect to family leave, volunteer and service assignments, and leadership roles in the workplace has empirical support.

Of course, if we don’t place such experiences in their appropriate contexts, any one of these can be questioned and countered. For every woman I know that has been overlooked or even insulted, I know another woman who has been supported and championed in her work. Indeed, male friends have routinely told me that there are many situations in which “men have it worse” and then half-jokingly say that they of course are not entitled to have an opinion because of their gender.

I don’t know how to counter such claims because they rest on the refusal to acknowledge invisible privilege. This isn’t a contest as to “who has it harder and why”. That is an argument no one will win – except, perhaps, those who are served by perpetuating the stereotypes of what academics (and women and men) should be. It’s also important to note that these issues will not just simplistically solved by increasing the numbers in academic programs so that our successes are reflected well (and of course, accrue positive attention to our institutions for their forward thinking policies on gender and work) in newsletters, Websites, and photos. There are still concerns to be named and claimed. These concerns are doubly important for women in fields such as computing where there are still more men than women at every rank and in every industry and gender expectations are perhaps more invisible and thus more insidious. Are we getting equal salaries to our male colleagues? Is the service we are being asked to do as academics on par with that of our male colleagues? What I want to do is to deflect attention from individual responsibility for making choices to widespread systemic, and yes, insidiously sexist assumptions about the “right” way to be an academic in an increasingly untenable system.

In short, it pays to be optimistic about our future as women in computing but vigilant about the issues that get in our way. Deeper institutional and structural problems often stymie our collective efforts to increase diversity. Unfortunately, these structural and institutional power structures are often the most difficult to fight. Perhaps this is because most people are not attuned to them or even worse, perpetuate them (accidentally or not).

Diversity in computing and diversity in academia are not just about putting more women on the cover of a magazine or touting how many have been recruited for our graduate programs. It’s about equal pay for equal work, institutions that support families of all kinds, and acknowledge disability. We need policies that recognize that men and women have children and parents or none, no partners or multiple partners, or partners of the opposite sex or same sex. That passions and interests and community matter. That physical and mental health cannot be sacrificed to an institution or a job.

What can we do as individuals? We can share resources, be honest about our successes and failures, think carefully about the kind of scholars and human beings we want to be. Men can refuse to participate in panels and discussions that don’t include women. As educators, we can encourage our male and female students (and each other) to study those subjects that specifically teach us the tools and language to understand structure and institutions. And of course, the tools to change them. We need to fight for ourselves to be human beings, not just human doings, by maintaining our interests and passions and families, and share our challenges with each other. When we are in positions of power, we can work to unearth the invisible, question the unquestioned, champion the unpopular. Most important, we can address privilege and inequity not as problems for each of us to solve or overcome by ourselves, but as institutional and policy concerns that diminish us all, by talking and writing about them.

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