Bending the Golden Rule

It has been 34 years since the passage of Title IX. Yet women in academia are still underpaid and underrepresented in the full professor ranks nationwide. Why is this still an operative convention? Identities, roles, and perceptions leave some wondering if the old male guard isn’t still guarding.

Key Words: academia, equity, Title IX, gender conventions, women’s salary inequity in academe, women’s scholarship

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NOTE: This is dedicated to my adult daughter, Kathleen Sheila DeSanto Christensen, in hope for unequivocal gender equity in the work place for her and her contemporaries.

Powerful Social Studies

According to West and Curtis (2006) women in academia in the United States only make up 24% of the full professors although there are a sizable number of women graduate students, assistant professors, and associate professors. Thirty-four years ago the Congress of the United States passed Title IX. Thus far, gender discrimination in its various forms exists and thrives, especially in higher education. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) tracks the disparity by gender in academia regarding promotion and salary and has done so for numerous years. The AAUP calls for continuous change and a deeper level of discourse regarding the disproportionate rank and salary issues in higher education, especially at doctoral-granting institutions. Equity is non-negotiable. So, the question is, “How is the disparity among women and men scholars in academe still an operative convention in 2010 across the United States?”
While in graduate school working on a Ph.D., 17 years ago, I was enrolled in a course entitled “Women in Education.” One of the texts read was by Aisenberg and Harrington (1988). At the particular institution where the course was taken, there were more men at the full professorship level than women at that time. The text proved enlightening and stuck deeply in my mind as enigmatic, especially in the field of education where the majority of the people in the field are women. At that time (1993), most of the administrators in school systems were male. Having 18 years of elementary school teaching experience, the entirety of the scenario, even at that time, appeared as unyielding, a patriarchal hierarchy.

As I put in the years of research, teaching, and service as a social studies teacher educator, maintaining the tri-fold mission came with some surprises and often illegal comments by superiors. Early on, when I questioned a lower salary differential than male counterparts I was advised that my husband made more money than other male faculty members. Not being tenured, I hesitated to complain about the flip-pant remark. However, it remained in the recesses of my memory as exploitive and political. The speaker had no accurate idea about my husband's salary. Concerning my work and compensation, what did it matter? As areas of teaching and service flourished and provided enjoyment, publishing three or four refereed articles in sound journals in the social studies and social justice were constant each year. After seven years, I was promoted to associate professor and tenured.

At that point, having reliable mentorship from numerous women in the social studies teacher education arena, holding office in national learned societies came to fruition. More highly respected publications were accomplished. The tri-fold mission was upheld to a strong standard. Continuing this criterion for six more years, it wasn’t until I expressed a desire to submit an application for full professorship that trouble ensued. First, male faculty counterparts broached the issue of changing procedures to voting for the granting of full professors. This effort was dropped when they realized it would be a very lengthy process. One wonders if some of the male faculty in our midst saw us first as women thus incapable of being scholars (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988).

Categorically, as an aside, the discrepancy does not just occur in academia. Recently Wanda Sykes, the comedian, broadcasted that David Letterman has mostly male comedy writers on his team, as do many other comedians. Architects and lawyers reveal the same account. Women are included in firms as associates but excluded as partners. Only business and journalism appear to accept women as justified and warranted as leaders and worthy of success in the aforementioned fields. Thus far in medicine, eminent women scholar physicians in specialized fields are the minority. Hence, the $50,000 question remains, “Where are the women?” (Aldridge, Christensen, Cowles, & Kohler, 2009). Will the Lilly Ledbetter’s Fair Pay Act of 2009 which amends the Civil Rights Act of 1964, make expansive changes to reawaken the "Golden Rule" not just in academe, but in all of employment? What happened to the Equal Pay Act of 1963, The Civil Rights Act of 1971, Title I, Section 102 in the United States of America? Lest we forget, consider the final verse of Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is Your Land” (which, of course, the land it isn’t):

In the squares of the city –
In the shadow of the steeple
Near the relief office –
I see my people
And some are grumblin’
and some are wonderin’
If this land’s still made
for you and me.

Women, is it time to push for “new rules,” a la, Bill Maher? (Scusi, some readers, forgive me. I too, am a fan. He’s a rather clever, talented, politico misogynist himself, in my humble estimation).

Now it is 2010. There is no “Golden Rule” in academe. Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) wrote about the “Sacred Grove,” and 22 years later, many women in academia across the United States continue living out this scholarly narrative. From this vantage point it is painful to see the bright and talented women passed over for prominent positions of scholarship in favor of less qualified men. Equally disheartening are women scholars of the highest caliber who are sometimes compelled to carry their greatest scholarly accomplishments with them as they travel to speak at international and national conferences. Other women scholars move around the country in pursuit of higher profile positions, which was advice once given to me as an option if I wanted a better raise. I was stunned and speechless, two descriptors that most who know me would not readily use to describe me.

West and Curtis (2006) reported the unequal income for women faculty at full professor rank as persisting at around 88% of male counterparts’ compensation. One reason given is the prevailing fact that women faculty are hired into institutions at lower salaries than are men. Empty promises to eliminate inequity and equalize differentials remain. Associations dance through my mind between men in academia and Congress members and the “C Street” in Washington, DC. Is it a group of men that is not what it appears to be? What is it, really, that appears to collectively and individually devalue women scholars?

Harkening back to this summer while taking some courses at Bank Street College to revitalize my waning Master’s degree in early childhood education, I spent time walking the upper Eastside and the campus of Teachers College. The circumference of the Horace Mann Building at Teachers’ College is adorned with male theorists in the foundations of education. Not one woman’s name is chiseled into its age-old education building.

It is the principle of a supposedly principled and noble profession of education. In the United States, where the youngest of citizens are immersed into the “Golden Rule,” in the halls of academia where teachers are educated and prepared at every level from core curriculum to the methods courses and beyond, the “Golden Rule” is bent. Sometimes it is broken, so broken it is fraudulent and immoral. So, how do universities expect their students to graduate and perpetuate something different? Will graduates be able to transform the bent rules of academia? The moral counter to the “Golden Rule” sends a strong message to the students and the public. It isn’t very civil. Treat others, especially women, as lesser? Maybe, push them around?

“Will the Lilly Ledbetter’s Fair Pay Act of 2009, that amends the Civil Rights Act of 1964, make expansive changes to reawaken “The Golden Rule” not just in academe, but in all of employment?”
The centrality and decentralized entities in academia essentially assign social identities and conventions to women that are, in essence, sexual in nature. Social roles are mainly contextually supportive. As scholars, women have been perceived as not as capable. If it were otherwise, there would be no need to convene ad hoc groups, gather committees, have explicit statements in faculty handbooks, write books on the topic, or listen to speeches. There would not be any need for legislation or litigation about social justice or gender equity in the workplace (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988). The “Golden Rule” is bent. Please, let’s stop bending the twigs, the youngest learners that some day may make the ruler.

References