

## *The Touchy-Feely Laboratory*

The Latest Angst About Women in Science

Every so often, a new report appears detailing the supposedly woeful state of women in American society. The most recent, “Beyond Bias and Barriers: Fulfilling the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering,” bears the imprimatur of the National Academy of Sciences—although the rigorous, objective methods of science seem strangely absent. Instead, sweeping and unsubstantiated claims of bias are cited as evidence of the need for aggressive federal monitoring of higher education and extensive reeducation about gender roles.

The group that authored the report, headed by Donna Shalala, secretary of Health and Human Services during the Clinton administration, is called the “Committee on Maximizing the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering”—its conclusions all but foreordained in its creation. The committee—seventeen women and one man, mostly with backgrounds in science, engineering, and education—set out to debunk the notion that innate differences between the sexes might lead to different lifestyle choices (and hence a smaller number of women pursuing certain academic fields). Typical of the report’s plodding and repetitive prose are statements such as: “For women to participate to their full potential across all science and engineering fields, they

must see a career path that allows them to reach their full intellectual potential.”

Yet the committee asserts rather than proves that sex differences have no bearing on women’s decisions to pursue or not pursue careers in science and engineering. The report states: “Studies have not found any significant biological differences between men and women in performing science and mathematics that can account for the lower representation of women in academic and faculty leadership positions.” This simply ignores reams of research by scientists who study sex differences. As Linda Gottfredson, co-director of the Delaware-Johns Hopkins Project for the Study of Intelligence and Society, told *New York Times* columnist John Tierney, “I am embarrassed that this female-dominated panel of scientists would ignore decades of scientific evidence to justify an already disproved conclusion, namely, that the sexes do not differ in career-relevant interests and abilities.”

As formal, institutional barriers to women’s success have crumbled, self-appointed wardens of discrimination have located a new enemy: what the report calls “unintentional biases and outmoded institutional structures.” In other words, unlike the chauvinism of past eras, discrimination today takes more subtle forms, forms that can only be perceived, evidently, by espe-

cially sensitive committees like this one. "Considerable research has shown the barriers limiting the appointment, retention, and advancement of women faculty," the report states. It is suspicious of traditional measurements of ability, blaming "outmoded 'rules' governing academic success" for women's failure to achieve at rates equal to men.

Despite the impressive gains made by women in the sciences—and in higher education more broadly, where college females now consistently outperform their male peers in grades and in earning degrees—the authors of the report remain frustrated that many women still do not pursue academic careers in fields like engineering and physics. As they ponder the unfulfilled potential of this supposedly oppressed cadre, they observe that "as they move from high school to college, more women than men who have expressed an interest in science or engineering decide to major in something else; in the transition to graduate school, more women than men with science and engineering degrees opt into other fields." Are these women brainwashed into choosing to major in a so-called "softer" science like biology instead of physics? Are they being "unintentionally" discouraged from entering male-dominated fields? The committee is loath to admit that women might simply prefer certain fields of academic inquiry to others, but to insist otherwise is to imply that these women are suffering from a form of false consciousness. In the effort to empower women, the committee only belittles them.

Some of the suggestions in the report, such as stopping the tenure clock for men and women who need to take time off for child-rearing or caregiving, are hardly radical, and are already being implemented at many colleges and universities. More disturbing is the committee's call for even more aggressive preferential hiring of women and for federally-funded reeducation campaigns. "Federal funding agencies and foundations should... host mandatory national meetings that educate members of review panels, university department chairs, and agency program officers about methods that minimize the effects of gender bias," the report states. The report also calls on university leaders to initiate mandatory workshops on combating gender bias and to create an "inter-institution monitoring organization" to collect data on the hiring and promotion of women. In other words, academic life under the watchful eye of Big Sister.

In the end, the report is less a call to arms than a call to sensitivity workshops. And the portrait of women in science and engineering that emerges from the report is less about facts than feelings. The press release issued with the report cites surveys claiming, "women were more likely than men to feel that colleagues devalued their research" and that women left universities because of "colleagues' lack of respect for them." This focus on the emotional needs of female scientists only reinforces the very stereotypes the report ostensibly wants to challenge.

Perhaps what women in the sciences really need is a healthy dose of group therapy. In the new book *Every Other Thursday: Stories and Strategies from Successful Women Scientists*, Ellen Daniell describes the consciousness-raising techniques that she and six other female scientists, who call themselves “Group,” have used during the course of their careers. In Group, the women happily trade the rigor of the laboratory for the emotional earnestness of self-help, making the book read like a transcript of a lachrymose coffee klatch. Ms. Daniell calls her meetings to order with the therapeutic clarion call, “Does anyone have any feelings they’d like to share?” If it weren’t the most earnest kind of non-fiction, you’d think this was a *Saturday Night Live* skit.

“A critical message of this book is that intimacy and reliance on others for encouragement and advice is a source of empowerment, not a sign of weakness,” writes Daniell. Members of the Group complain about feeling “disrespected” at faculty meetings or the difficult time they have, as women, criticizing their own students. The Group even created their own vocabulary to describe their various emotional challenges: “Pig,” for example, is “a negative self-perception, an external judgment that one assumes and uses to defeat oneself.” One woman explains that she has a “fraud pig” when she starts out in a new field of research and doesn’t yet know anything about it, a “has-been pig” when she has nothing new to say, and a “moth pig,” which

characterized her much admired scientific versatility as ‘flitting from field to field.’” The ladies end their sessions by saying positive and uplifting things about each other, called “strokes.” Actions are described in terms of personal “contracts” and, of course, feelings. When Daniell was contemplating her retirement options, she “made a contract to ‘recognize the value of my feelings (excitement, pride, anxiety) at this time of transition and give myself permission to experience them.’”

Besides the rather limited voyeuristic pleasure of listening in on others’ group therapy, *Every Other Thursday* offers little in the way of practical advice for young women contemplating careers in the sciences. If anything, these self-esteem hives might frighten an intellectually ambitious female away from academic life in search of a more achievement-driven, less hyper-emotional career path. The reason the “hard sciences” are hard is because feeling is not enough; achievement counts, and unlike work in the postmodern humanities, it is measurable. That women in the past were not always judged fairly or given credit for their achievements is clear; that talented women of the present can flourish based on their talents alone seems undeniable; and that some women may prefer other fields, for their own good reasons, seems like an obvious truth that modern feminists foolishly and relentlessly deny.

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