

# The Saturn's Rings Phenomenon

by Mary P. Rowe, Ph.D.

"Affirmative action" has made startlingly little difference to America's most prestigious universities when progress is measured in absolute terms. For some academic departments the *percentage* improvement is huge, often infinite, since, for example, the difference between no women and one woman is an "infinite" percentage increase. But in *absolute* terms we are moving very slowly in the country's top faculties. Recent studies, including one commissioned by HEW to look at medical education, have concluded that we need careful studies of the ambiance in education and employment, to see more clearly why affirmative action is so slow.

In my job, of course, I see many reasons for slowness. Some women and blacks are poorly prepared, or so ambivalent that they fail to do good work. Some men actively fight the law of the land to maintain illegal discriminatory practices. But in my job I also find another factor at work — a problem that does not lend itself to legal redress or to improvement in time of economic promise, and which occurs with frequency at the best and most humane of

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*Dr. Mary P. Rowe is Special Assistant to the President and Chancellor for Women and Work at MIT where she also teaches. The examples of discrimination cited in this study are all real incidents in the lives of women and minority people in educational institutions in the Boston area. This article is excerpted from a speech entitled, "Saturn's Rings;" (the formidable rings around Saturn being made up primarily of bits of sand and ice). Some of the informal curriculum for women and minorities in large educational institutions — the minutiae of discrimination — also are like grains of sand, which impede educational processes and good jobs for women and minorities.*

institutions. This problem — the minutiae of discrimination — appears to be a major distortion in education. It is formidable not least because of the pettiness of individual events and because there are no adequate individual solutions. Throughout the history of science we have found the importance of seemingly small events and things: rockets do not fly with grains of sand in the system, trauma wounds heal better without sand in the sutures.

I deal with dozens of complaints every week, of which nearly all are, practically speaking, not actionable. In my institution obviously illegal behavior is very rare and the administration gives short shrift to its perpetrators. Unconscious slights, harassment, exploitation, provision of poor service and psychiatric problems manifested in sexist and racist behavior are however rather common, in all institutions.

## *Unconscious Sights and Invisibility Problems*

One becomes aware of one's invisibility slowly, because it happens only now and then and is difficult to identify. We say we are invisible when our name is mysteriously left off a list — the list of postdoctoral openings or of new faculty or of those with committee assignments or lab partners. There is a last minute luncheon; only the woman professor is not introduced. "I was the only woman on the committee that handled maternity benefits; they never asked me to speak." A study group is set up on inner-city family structures — without minority or female members.

These invisibility and other unconscious slights are difficult to handle. If it is only you who are addressed by your first name, are you sure it is sexism? How can you be sure your paper was turned down because of sexism?

Maybe it was a poor paper. Is your office space more noisy only by accident? Imagine you are the only top administrator whose office is not in the main building. Can you protest when you do not believe an insult was intended — and besides there is not very much space? (And what does one do with unintended insults that are still insulting?) Imagine that a woman professional who was supposed to do a job for a certain department copped out, and now the department somehow simply does not seek out another woman, even though the subject matter directly concerns women. Do you describe to them what you think is going on? Sometimes one thinks it is not worth it to protest. And yet I remember so vividly the face of a black student who came back from his first class in biomedical statistics. An example given in this class had been the VD experiments in the South which used poor, black men, without informed consent and without proper treatment. This experiment, a longitudinal study, had been cited as a fine example of long-term research. The young black student was deeply bewildered and hurt. Was it important to protest?

## *Harassment, Exploitation, Provision of Poor Service*

Harassment is not ordinarily actionable. It is the department head who says "if she is given tenure, I will see that she is so miserable that she goes." It is the teacher who refuses to learn a young woman's name or calls her by the name of someone else, or who calls a young black woman by his own cute nickname for her. It is the professor who systematically humiliates his female students about their appearance, or the department head who loads on extra work to prove a woman cannot succeed in that job or because he knows she will not refuse.

Exploitation of certain kinds is common. The single black professor is asked to serve as a token on endless committees (not always the most important committees). A female graduate student works overtime nights and Sundays with disproportionately little recognition; sometimes, as we have seen, even providing the basic discovery for Nobel Prize research, but without appropriate status or remuneration (cf. *Science*, July 1975).

Poor service and inadequate support to women and blacks is equally prevalent. Women medical students may miss out on the informal teaching given by a male surgeon while scrubbing for an operation. A black lab employee who was asked if she was "going to get pregnant soon," when she discussed her plans to apply to medical school, was also told she was a "bitch with no right to quit, who could have a great career as a lab technician if she was 'really' tired of typing for the lab."

### *Psychological Difficulties with Sexist and Racist Manifestations*

Many of the incidents reported to our office reflect serious psychological problems of some faculty and staff. A black student who came back from a lab in tears had been told, when she came in with a bad cold, "Chick, what you need is a hot, deep protein infusion!" One scientist wrote me, "Despite the fact that women may be even more qualified, I believe we should curtail the admissions of women; they will deter men from doing their best creative work." There was the black freshman, who came in after someone "jokingly" threatened him with a lynching. And the written reference given for a woman scientist which stated, "You can hire this woman for your lab if you want to, but I'd rather have her body than her mind."

There are the occasional men who expose themselves, who need to seduce women they see as competitive, who pick on handicapped women, who will lie to blacks and women, who deliberately try to arouse a woman's guilt or worry about her family or femininity, who will smilingly say to a woman student, "I believe the only interesting thing about you is between your legs."

### *What Damage Is Done By The Minutiae of Discrimination?*

There is as yet no serious study of these micro-inequities, but one can suggest many hypotheses as to why such behavior, which of course happens in other forms to white males, may do disproportionate damage to women and minorities. I believe these inequities *do* cause serious damage or I would not label them a major barrier to equal opportunity. Micro-inequities cause damage in part because:

- They often lead to obviously illegal behavior. Thus overlooking or "seeing through" women and minorities is a habit that may well lead to overlooking the best-qualified (woman and/or black) for promotion, or to underpaying women and blacks.

- They are a kind of pain which cannot be predicted very well in any functional sense. That is, by and large, they occur in the *context* of merit, and of striving for excellence, but do not have anything predictably to *do* with excellence or merit; that is, of course, what makes them "inequities." As an intermittent, unpredictable reinforcement, however, they have peculiar power as a negative learning tool, (unpredictable, intermittent reinforcement being among the more powerful types of reinforcement).

- They take up time. Sorting out what is happening to one, dealing with one's pain and anger, takes time. Extra time also is demanded from many women and minority people to help others deal with pain caused by micro-inequities.

- They prevent better behavior from occurring in addition to the direct pain inflicted. If a secretary or graduate student is unreasonably overloaded with routine or personal work for a supervisor, the overloaded person may suffer a loss of self-esteem and may also be prevented from doing the kind of excellent work that qualifies one for promotion.

- They often originate with more powerful people against less powerful people. Since less powerful people by definition have less influence it is not hard to see why it is difficult to get rid of micro-aggressors in *general*, let alone

specific individuals who happen to be the victim's own supervisor or advisor.

- They are petty in a world where redress by the less powerful may often seem heavy-handed. Unionization, going to court, even appeal to the president's office may seem extreme weapons which themselves have high costs. The perceived lack of *appropriate* degrees of redress helps perpetuate micro-aggressions. This is, incidentally, why our offices handle "inquiries" as well as "grievances," and why we are gently trying to make ourselves better known. This is also why we try to be of no "cost" or low "cost" to those who prove to have been victims, taking on ourselves the onus of redress rather than always requiring victims to suffer not only the pain of injury but the costs of redress.

- Micro-inequities grow in mad and infinite variety. One has to get up early in the morning to stay ahead of the proliferation of types, let alone the number of petty injuries. Thus most women and blacks find themselves occasionally fighting the last war rather than the present one.

- They may have a negative Pygmalion quality. That is, the expectation of poor performance, or the lack of expectation of good performance, may by itself do damage because students and employees have a strong tendency to do what is expected of them.

- They contribute to barriers between men and women and blacks and whites, which means that each group fails to understand what the other faces. The forms of sexism are so specific that men and woman are isolated from each other's experience; so also for the forms of racism. Cross-group communications are always slower and more difficult; cross-group judgments are harder to make well. Thus women and men, blacks and whites, may make errors about each other ranging from paranoia to an inability to hear any criticism against individuals of a different race or sex.

- They are often difficult to detect or be sure about. Frequent victims, like women and blacks, may constantly have to deal with emotions ranging from legitimate anger to paranoia. The experience of being uncertain

about whether one was insulted or put down, inevitably leads to some displaced and misplaced anger which in turn may anger innocent (or guilty) bystanders.

- They are often not *intentional* in any conscious or even unconscious way even when objective observers would agree that an injury really took place. We are all socialized to believe that *intent to injure* is an important part of injury, and it is certainly critical to our dealing with injuries at the hands of others. Faced with a micro-aggression, the victim may not be certain of the motives of the aggressor and may be unwilling to start a fight where none was meant. Under conditions of uncertainty about motives most victims are again in the position of sometimes not getting angry when they should (which perpetuates the injuries and may weaken the victim's self-image), or protesting sometimes when no injury was *consciously* intended even though it actually occurred. The latter situation may

be salutary for all concerned, especially if the aggressor reacts by acknowledging an unconscious intent to injure. But sometimes the aggressor is totally unaware of aggressing, and he or she may respond with anger, feelings of betrayal, bewilderment or worse.

It is apparent that there is no easy way to turn off micro-inequities. In fact, traditionally white male environments may even exacerbate certain kinds of discriminatory behavior like the aggressive and humiliating telling of dirty jokes in a lab. Continued experience of destructive situations that cannot be improved can start unhappy cycles of behavior ranging from declining self-esteem (which makes one feel still less efficacious in changing the environment) to withdrawal, resignation, poor work, fantasies of violence, and so on. At the very least either it takes a lot of energy to deal with an environment perceived as hostile, or it takes a lot of energy to maintain one's level of denial. (I have known many men and

women to struggle for days at a time with their profound anger at an apparently "petty" insult.)

### *Do micro-aggressions do more harm to women and minorities than to others?*

The question is frequently raised whether micro-aggressions do not just "happen to everyone." Quite frequently I will talk with a professor who openly says, "I harass everybody, Mary. I don't discriminate." Here let me raise hypotheses as to why micro-aggressions might be worse for minorities and women than for the average white male.

The "general" harassment often takes specifically sexist or racist form when applied to women and minorities rather than being randomly applied, or appropriately focused on their work. Instead of saying to some average white male, "Your work on this experiment has been inexcusably sloppy; you'll



never make it that way!", the remark may come out, "My God, you think no better than my wife; go home and have babies!" Or, "That simply won't do; I don't know how we are to make up for the centuries of Southern schools that produced you!" Like the dripping of water, random drops do little damage; endless drops in one place can have profound effects.

Many women and minority people are socialized to respond disproportionately swiftly to disapproval. Parents have carefully taught most female and many black, Spanish and Indian children to cooperate rather than to compete, especially when they are with white males, and to be very sensitive to anger and criticism from white males. Conversely one can find many white males who were explicitly socialized to expect hard knocks, to compete ferociously and openly even when injured, and to have a very high pain threshold in the first place. It would be hard to prove that either kind of socialization is "right" or "wrong" in absolute terms, but it is easy to see how these two cultural paths run afoul of each other. If a white male professor shouts angrily for five minutes at a young woman, she may not wholly "recover" from the attack for weeks or months or years.

Later, in a discussion with the professor however, one may hear that he's forgotten his "random grouchiness" or thought it was trivial. Thus, behavior that might be trivial or survivable for the modal white male may be quite destructive to minorities and females in a manner that has nothing directly to do with the work at hand.

Just as it is hard for victims to put a stop to micro-aggression, in a traditionally white male atmosphere, it may also be harder for *bystanders* to stop certain kinds of micro-inequities because the slights are so normal that they simply are not noticed. Many white male professors are acutely uncomfortable around black and male secretaries and ignore them or fail to look at and address them — but do not notice it and neither do bystanders. Traditional pornography on walls, traditionally sexist jokes, and the use of sex in ads and announcements is so ubiquitous that probably most men do not consciously recognize them or may even add to them happily. Thus while some *general* forms of harassment and difficulty may

be stopped by bystanders, some racist and/or sexist behavior may be overlooked in some departments because it is so "normal."

There is a more acute role-modeling problem for women and blacks with respect to their witnessing micro-inequities against others like themselves. That is, disproportionately more women and minorities see people "like them" put down or ignored or ill-served by their superiors and elders. This point may be clearer when one remembers that the principal same-race and same-sex role models for minority and female students are clerical workers and hourly workers, those groups most frequently reporting micro-inequities.

It may be harder for blacks and women to find mentors to help them deal with micro-inequities. Because there are so few minorities and women, in high level positions, other minority and female members of the community cannot, on the average, find the same amount of high-status, same-race or same-sex mentorship that white males can find. Sometimes the higher-status blacks and women try to compensate by spending extra time as same-race and same-sex mentors, but get deeply tired.

Sometimes there is also a peculiar difficulty in finding an *appropriate* mentor when one has been the victim of a racist or sexist micro-aggression. If one goes to a white male, he may or may not understand. If one goes to a same-race, same-sex friend and/or mentor, he or she may be just wonderful in helping one to deal with it or may be of no help at all. That is, listeners of the same race and sex may be so discouraged and angry, or so full of denial, that they are worse than useless. I believe therefore that it may often be more difficult for minorities and women to find adequate help in dealing with the minutiae of racism and sexism than for average members of the community to deal with "general inhumanities."

Many women and minority students and employees have a disproportionate need for supportive white male mentorship and are disproportionately injured when a white male advisor or teacher or supervisor assigned to them is just generally inhuman. Let us take an example, Susie Hernandez who is a student. She needs someone to advise her

about getting ahead in our white male environment because it is foreign to her. She may not be getting much support from Spanish-speaking people at home because she is living a non-traditional life. She is less well supported by the general society and may be less well supported by her family than if she were a white male. If her assigned advisor turns out to be just generally inattentive, gruff and cold, she has been deprived of a needed, positive mentor in circumstances where she needed assistance probably more than the modal white male student. The situation will be compounded if she is afraid to ask for a new advisor or does not know how to find substitute help.

Therefore there are many reasons why the problem of micro-inequities for minorities and women goes beyond the *general* inhumanities of large organizations. The point may be clearer if you will imagine being a solo, young, white, male, child care worker in a large, conservative, inner-city day care system. The "general harassment" might include sincere questions and snide comments on your sexuality. Other white males might find you odd. Blacks and females might distrust your skills. You might *be* in fact inept in some ways your first year. You might be very sensitive to the just run-of-the-mill anger from your cross-sex, cross-race supervisor. You might find the constant assumption that women-are-better to be very oppressive — the ads, the jokes, the pictures on the walls, the fathers deprived of custody. You might have no one like yourself to turn to. You might get to hate always being asked to fix things and being asked by visitors why you are there.

Micro-inequities are a sad by-product of situations where anyone is functioning in a non-traditional environment. They probably cause more pain for non-traditional members of any community than for traditional members. I believe the minutiae of racism and sexism constitute formidable barriers to advancement for minorities and women. Invisibly, harassment, exploitation, poor service and deep seated psychological problems of a racist and sexist nature all create special difficulties in educational institutions. These patterns must be recognized and seen in perspective in order to cope with them well.