20 March 1959, Volume 129, Number 3351

SCIENCE

SCIENCE, which is now combined with THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at Business Press, Lancaster, Pa. The joint journal is published in the SCIENCE format. Entered at the Lancaster, Pa., Post Office as second class matter under the Act of 3 March 1879. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature.*

Editorial and personnel-placement correspondence should be addressed to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed with double spacing and submitted in duplicate. The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by contributors. For detailed suggestions on the preparation of manuscripts, book reviews, and illustrations, see *Science* 125, 16 (4 Jan. 1957).

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Annual subscriptions: $8.50; foreign postage, $1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢. Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

Science for the Misses

One of the conclusions reached by James B. Conant in his recent report on American high schools is that academically talented girls are not receiving satisfactory guidance. Studying in detail a group of 22 better-than-average high schools, Conant found that in most of the schools a majority of the academically talented boys are taking at least seven years of science and mathematics during four high-school years, while in none of the schools are a majority of the more able girls taking seven years of science and mathematics. From some viewpoints the guidance at present offered able girls in the schools should be changed, but from the viewpoint of women now seeking full, constructive lives as scientists, engineers, or mathematicians, the present guidance makes sense.

To discourage girls from going into science may be realistic because, as observers note, women are discriminated against in this field. They have less chance than men of being employed at their full potential, and they are employed at lower salaries. The attitude in the schools reflects the attitude in the adult world. Only boys and men may profitably study mechanical things and scientific ideas; girls and women will find them too difficult. Or, to put the general consensus even more briefly, men are better than women.

Whatever the present attitudes, the battle of the sexes is not yet over. Improvement in opportunities for girls who become scientists, engineers, or mathematicians may occur, perforce, because of increases in the demand for specialized talent. There is every expectation that excellence in science will play an increasingly important role in the contest between East and West as well as in our expanding civilian economy. As to how this country now stands in relation to the Soviet Union, a number of observers have compared unfavorably our present use of able women with theirs, particularly in engineering and medicine.

To seek a change in those attitudes that put a limit on the achievements of women over and above the limit set by abilities is not to forget that girls become women and women get married and raise children. The employment of women does raise problems not raised by the employment of men. More liberal personnel policies may be necessary, especially as they bear on leaves of absence, part-time schedules, and travel requirements. But if life becomes a little less convenient for the employer, in a field like that of research it can still be readily managed.

On the question of men, women, and careers, we must confess that we have our prejudices, too. We like to see talent encouraged whether it is possessed by a boy or a girl, and whether the talent is in science or in some other field of endeavor. That the employment of more women is part of the answer to growing demands for technological manpower seems to us clearly proved, but we see a manpower shortage less as a reason for employing women in science than as a good argument for putting able women where they should be in any case. Increases in demand for specialized talent may be just the thing to stop the cycle in which the lack of education of able women means poor opportunities, and poor opportunities mean less motivation to seek more education.—J.T.