

All-Women Conference: Did It Discriminate?

As participants in the recently held scientific conference "Women Scientists Look At Evolution: Female Biology and Life History," we wish to correct the misrepresentation of the conference in the News & Comment article of 28 September "Female primatologists confer—without men" by Jennie Dusheck (p. 1494).

First, contrary to the article's title, this was not a conference solely of primatologists; nor did primatologists constitute even a majority of the 17 invited attendees. Participants represented a broad spectrum of fields, including human physiology, reproductive endocrinology, ethnology, psychology, paleontology, functional morphology, and behavioral ecology.

The inference that men are not qualified to conduct or discuss research on menopause was not suggested by a single member of the conference during the entire week of meetings. All scientific study was freely discussed without reference to the investigator's sex. Clearly the conference consensus supported open exchange among all scientists.

The purpose of this small invitational conference was the exchange of scientific findings and ideas through formation of a "working group." Traditional "association meetings" do not accommodate this kind of interchange. Rather, ours was a cross-disciplinary effort characterized by several days of intense, focused interaction devoted to assessing, integrating, and developing the theories and data addressing female life history.

Why a conference of women scientists? One reason is simply because we are a minority in any of the fields represented, including primatology. Many of the participants are from departments with only one or two women; others are not affiliated with a traditional academic or research program. Our lines of communication are, therefore, tenuous. It is widely recognized that women face unique obstacles in academia. It is for these reasons that several programs, including those at the National Science Foundation and Stanford University's recent Conference for Women in Medicine, are designed to increase the number of women scientists and encourage the research opportunities of those already active.

Some participants were openly apprehensive about an all-women conference and attended for scientific reasons. Some of us

attended because we saw a need to establish lines of communication with other women in the field. Some of us attended because we understood one of the themes to be self-reflection on how we came to ask the questions we do as scientists—how our own life histories affect our perspectives of the female life history phenomena we study. This relationship does not make us better scientists, poorer scientists, or even uniquely qualified to comment on these phenomena; but we do bring a different perspective and an added dimension to our subject matter. Discrimination and bad science occur when a group of scientists, homogeneous with respect to some important variable, ignore the fact that they have a unique perspective, pretend to be objective, and claim to represent all scientists. There was never any suggestion that gender affects the quality of one's science, only that gender affects one's perspective. To acknowledge this and to deal with it explicitly is innovative and is good science.

The denigrating stance adopted in Dusheck's article is made patently obvious by a choice of wording that is, in several instances, belittling and dismissive of the research conducted by women scientists. Designating the encouragement and guidance of new women scholars as "mothering" rather than "mentoring"—a time-honored and flourishing tradition in academia—is particularly revealing of the prejudicial bias of the article. The quotes used from the sources evaluating the conference also strongly suggest that these opinions were based on biased information or were deliberately selected to provide color. The use of the cartoon, which portrayed these women as "little girls" playing at science, only worsened an already insulting work.

Finally, the article ignores a unique functional aspect of this conference that distinguished it from others of its format. This was the inclusion of (i) a public forum and (ii) active participation of science writers in sessions aimed at bettering communication between reporting and research.

By ignoring the scientific contributions of the participants, misrepresenting the spirit and intent of the conference, and constructing and knocking down a "straw man" (or a "straw woman"), thereby diminishing the value of the conference with this artificial construct, Dusheck's article reveals a disturbing disrespect for all women scientists.

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One would be hard pressed to find a better example of sexism and discrimination than that represented by the organizers and participants of the recent conference entitled, "Women Scientists Look at Evolution: Female Biology and Life History." The assumption that one must be female to understand, discuss, perform research on, or attend meetings about female biology or behavior is absolutely absurd. Data are neutral and objective; it is the interpretation of those data, if not careful, that may fall prey to prejudice. By demonstrating their utter failure to adhere to dispassionate and wholly representative analysis of such data, the individuals above taint the work they are doing. It is indeed a sad day when one's gender excludes full participation in the pursuit of one's career. Now, does that not have a familiarly ominous ring to the principals involved in the present case?

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Epidermal Growth Factor

With regard to Ann Gibbon's interesting article about the recent Cold Spring Harbor meeting on "Evolution: Molecules to Culture" (Research News, 26 Oct., p. 504), if I really said, "The EGF [epidermal growth factor] domain is found in all animals and plants," then I misspoke. To my knowledge, these structures have only been identified so far in animals and an animal virus (vaccinia). Certainly the slide I showed at the meeting did not list any plants.

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