On "Elitism" and the Gifted

Markita Price

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq

Part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/437
On “Elitism” and the Gifted

Dear Editor:

At the recent NWSA National Convention in Indiana, a delegate spoke against the use of the word “gifted” in the title of one of the sessions. She said that the word was elitist. Because there were people applauding her remarks, I would like to clarify the assumptions and blatant stereotypes she used in denouncing the gifted.

Gifted, talented, and very creative children are a minority in the schools. Unfortunately, they are not usually identified early. Sometimes, even if a child can be identified as gifted (or talented or creative), the stereotypes surrounding this identification make it impossible to obtain extra teaching help or challenging surroundings for this child. Holding this child back with her/his age peers is forced retardation in education. A child who can compose a concerto at age 10 should not be in a music class learning to sing simple tunes. A girl who at age 11 can outscore most seniors in high school on the math SAT should not be placed in seventh-grade arithmetic. Yet the majority of people assume that these children will make it on their own since they are so “smart.” Talent in whatever form must be nurtured in order for it to grow and develop. Many teachers have neither the time nor the understanding in some cases to deal with these children. Extra money and talented teachers are now available for individual help for children who are mentally retarded. We should also have the extra help for children who are mentally gifted. Who knows how many artists we have lost because in the early grades they did not paint their pictures “right”?

The problem is especially vital for women because of the socialization process which tells young girls to hide any intellectual abilities. This is especially apparent in mathematics. At Johns Hopkins a special class was held for seventh-graders who scored 600 or better on the math SAT exam. Following that summer class, most of the boys were able to go on to accelerated math classes in their regular schools. Almost all the girls returned to their seventh-grade arithmetic classes. Some of the reasons were administrative (the principals couldn’t seem to find classes for them to attend), but most were social (the girls didn’t want to be different). Women face, with the “stigma” of being creative or talented or gifted, the added burden of being “different.”

Moreover, gifted racial minority students face a double hazard. First, they face discrimination based on their race. Second, their intellectual gifts are not appreciated; are generally ignored, if not discouraged; and most certainly are not developed without great personal sacrifice. Because the theme of next year’s Convention is racism, I would like to urge strongly that a workshop be focused on the problem of gifted minority students and the barriers they face in developing their talents.

Sincerely yours,

Markita Price
Mathematics Department
Stephens College
Columbia, Missouri

On “Unfeminist Behavior” at the Convention

To the Women’s Studies Newsletter:

I left Bloomington after the NWSA Convention both elated and concerned. As one of the Program Coordinators I was generally happy with the Convention and appreciative of the many “thank yous” I had received. Most of the women to whom I spoke expressed satisfaction with the meeting and felt that the time they had spent in Bloomington had been energizing and educational. I want to thank each woman for her support and positive feedback.

Yet, as I left Bloomington, my elation was tinged with anger and concern because I had witnessed a great deal of insensitive and unfeminist behavior. What I am about to say in no way applies to all participants/registrants at the Convention, most of whom were congenial and cooperative. Yet the insensitivity and unfeminist behavior which I saw and experienced were prevalent enough to generate, in me and in several others, a concern for our values and principles.

I am not speaking to the internal politics of NWSA or the various political interest groups within NWSA. (I might comment, however, that these “politics” leave unnamed and unchallenged the real foe—the white male power elite.) I am speaking to a politics which some of us feminists seem to have forgotten or possibly abandoned—namely, our loyalty to women and how we express and live that loyalty in simple everyday interactions.

What I witnessed behind the scenes were demands, expectations, assumptions, noncooperation, and even hostility exhibited by some women toward others. The Indiana University women, who had worked harder than anyone could imagine to create a comfortable environment and smoothly-running Convention, received very little appreciation and, indeed, often experienced the opposite.

On the most basic level, several women assumed and insisted that the women in the Convention Office constituted a secretarial pool to serve their needs. One irate woman claimed that if men had organized this Convention, they (the men) would have provided typists. Well, maybe so—but isn’t that the point? We are not men and do not assume that women in an office constitute a servant class! Even so, Convention staffers did type and run the stencil machines, not because it was their job but because they found it easier to do so than to face the hostility of those making the demands.

Transportation to and from the Indianapolis Airport was another problematic area. A few participants expected to be picked up or taken to the airport (and some were!). Many complained that buses from Bloomington to Indianapolis were not scheduled at their convenience.

Many women were incredibly hostile during registration, demanding instant service or preferential treatment. Several others complained about services at IU over which the on-site coordinator had no control: J. P. Stevens sheets on the beds; Taster’s Choice coffee in the cafeteria. Numbers of registrants did not turn in room keys when leaving, despite numerous announcements reminding them to do so. There were many