

Dr. Valian Stresses Gender Equity in Academia



On December 2, Dr. Virginia Valian, author of the book *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, spent the day at Gladstone talking to women—and men—about why women advance so slowly in the academic world, providing insight into the problem and potential remedies.

Schemas Form Basis for Judgment

During her 2-hour meeting with Gladstone and SFGH women, she introduced the notion of gender schemas and how they contribute to misguided expectations of someone. A schema is a “hypothesis we use to interpret social events,” said Dr. Valian, professor of psychology and linguistics at Hunter College in New York and the City University of New York Graduate Center. For example, men are generally looked upon as being competent and are therefore expected to do well. On the other hand, people don’t usually feel as positive about a woman’s capability and thus don’t think a woman can perform as well as a man. People tend to overrate men and underrate women.

“Men walk around with a plus sign. Women bear a minus sign,” Dr. Valian said.

Even women sabotage themselves by thinking that they’re less entitled to reward or that their work is less valuable. In one study, college students were asked to perform a task and to do it for as long as they should to be paid five dollars. The men worked slower and did less, whereas the women worked faster and longer and did more for the same amount of money.

“We ourselves are perpetuating the problem,” Dr. Valian said.

Small Advantages Add Up

The gender schemas give men certain advantages over women. Although small advantages may seem insignificant, Dr. Valian has proven that they add up, resulting in great disparities and more men at the top. “People say ‘don’t make a mountain out of a mole hill.’ But mountains are mole hills piled up on top of each other,” she said.

These mountains result in inequities. On the average, women scientists and physicians make less than their male counterparts and advance more slowly.

Solutions to Reverse the Inequity

Fortunately, there are steps that can remedy the situation. Change doesn't come fast. "You're not going to change the schemas overnight," Dr. Valian said.

To start, there are important prerequisites. First, you must identify the problem. Second, you need to see that good intentions aren't enough. Third, you need to recognize the need for ongoing attention and effort (there's no one-time fix). Finally, you need to treat the problem as susceptible to scientific analysis.

Then, leaders can take direct action. This includes committing resources and spending the money it takes to instill change and creating women leaders. Dr. Valian encouraged the women at the luncheon to organize as a group, which has more power than an individual.

Dr. Valian also had a special 1 1/2-hour meeting with the investigators. In addition to presenting her theories about gender schemas and the accumulation of advantage, she spoke about strategies for recruiting talented scientists. She advised the investigators to think about recruiting more than just one woman investigator.

Good Reviews from Gladstone

Gladstone women said they enjoyed Dr. Valian's presentation. Kam Dahlquist said that she could identify with some of the examples that Dr. Valian used. "It's extremely valuable to listen to somebody who has concrete examples," Kam said.

Teri Leigler, one of the organizers, said that she was pleased to see so many people interested in the event. She said that Dr. Valian made everyone think about the way they do things and the biases they have.

"You don't see the biases. You don't notice them. That's why it's important to be reminded," Teri said. She said that she looks forward to future events, including visits by women scientists, which will address gender inequities.

Bob Grant said he enjoyed Dr. Valian's presentation and found her viewpoints insightful. He agreed that diversity helps scientific institutions to undergo needed change and to embrace new ideas. "A diverse faculty would enhance our ability to do all that and to create a more vibrant intellectual environment," he said.

Gladstone co-sponsored Dr. Valian's visit with the UCSF Center for Gender Equity, which is directed by Dr. Amy Levine, and the Chancellor's Advisory Committee on the Status of Women.

Bob Mahley and the directors reported receiving many positive comments from Gladstone staff about Dr. Valian's important and insightful presentations. Bob thanks Sylvaine Cases, Teri Liegler, Mikki Martinez, and Laura Napolitano for their contributions toward continuing and expanding the dialogue at Gladstone regarding gender equity. "I applaud their efforts and look forward to future events," he said.