

Fw: Invitation to a conversation

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Dear Ted,

It has now been just over 7 weeks since your Quillette piece dropped. This feels somehow significant, doesn't it? 7 weeks is the time it takes the human visual cortex to (mostly) mature. When a baby is born, the world is a blur of light and dark splotches... but by 7 weeks, it is filled with shapes and colors and motion, and the baby can see.

So, what do we see?

Let's start with the obvious. Your article has certainly sparked a great deal of debate and discussion online. Some of the people who commented, particularly on the math blogs, even read your paper (though the vast majority didn't). And the main characters in your Quillette story: you, Sergei, Igor, and Amie, have all received a great deal of attention. In my case, a few lines I wrote hastily in a private email to a close colleague (all within hours of seeing your preprint for the first time) have now become my most famous words, echoed and analyzed across countless right-wing websites and translated into several languages, including Spanish and French. The whole thing has truly been spectacular to watch. And now, at least for me, the initial blur has finally given way to a clearer picture of what has happened.

And what has happened? In a nutshell, the main message most people got from your article was this: women in mathematics (a.k.a. feminist activists) pushed for outright censorship of your paper in order to bury an "uncomfortable truth" that is supported by rigorous mathematics. And the discussions, even on the math blogs, have revealed a great deal of confusion about who is responsible for bad editorial decisions, and whether or not your model has any real mathematical or scientific value. I don't want to rehash these discussions. Despite all the confusion, those debates have at least happened, with moderate success.

Another thing that has happened, unfortunately, is a further polarization of the two "sides" of this conflict (for lack of a better term). Amie has been vilified as an insecure leftist feminazi, and Igor has been vilified as a right-wing misogynist. Neither of these portrayals is accurate, of course, but fortunately both Amie and Igor have been able to weather these attacks with a great deal of dignity and class. On the other hand, these caricatures have only added to the confusion in the public understanding of what motivated both proponents and opponents of your paper. To many who read your Quillette piece and the subsequent discussions on the math blogs, it is clear that you and Sergei and Igor were all motivated by misogyny and a desire to protect the status quo of male dominance in the world of mathematics. To many others, it is clear that Amie and Benson and WIM members at Penn State were motivated by feminist ideology and a desire to protect the status quo of female advantage in hiring. Still others, who remember you from your Georgia Tech days, are suspicious that you were looking for a fight.

Personally, what I regret the most in seeing how this has all played out is this: despite all the time, energy, pixels and emotions that have been spent on this affair, the most important debate is the one that we are still not having. At the

end of the day, I think the real issue everyone is interested in is this:

(1) Why are women underrepresented in mathematics? and (2) What, if anything, should we be doing about this?

These are separate questions, but people's beliefs about the first tend to inform their thoughts about the second.

I think you are also interested in these questions. Several years ago, you wrote an opinion piece in the *Intelligencer* on gender differences in creativity. You began the article by discussing national policies - and large sums of money that have been spent - in various efforts to promote women in science and mathematics. On some level, I think what you and Sergei initially wanted to do with your VH paper was to spark this kind of debate. And it's a discussion I think we should be having, because right now there is a lot of disagreement (and resentment, I dare say) regarding the current policies.

On (1), I think it's worth clarifying the different positions here, and trying to understand what are the underlying reasons that shape and inform such disparate opinions on this matter. If you go back to Larry Summers (2005), for example, he considers 3 possible explanations for the phenomenon of underrepresentation, and his arguments in favor of the two biological explanations are largely driven by his belief that explanation #3, current discrimination in hiring, is insufficient to account for the low numbers of women we see in top math and science departments. I actually agree with him on this, but I believe Summers made a big mistake at the outset by considering only 3 factors (and not the most important 3, in my opinion). Pinker's subsequent analysis of the situation doesn't help much, either, because he sticks to this limited space of possibilities and opts instead to psychoanalyze the opposition with a theory about what we all consider "taboo." He also relies way too much on projecting from feminist theory, a subject most women in science are pretty clueless about. The result of this so-called "debate" was thus a mess of misunderstanding, which continues to this day.

Moving onto (2), I think this is also worth discussing seriously, even if we can never come to any reasonable agreement on (1). In particular, I believe many of the current policies and practices designed to increase the representation of women (and other minority groups) in mathematics may be having negative repercussions. Surely one does not have to agree on the causes of a disease in order to agree that the current medicine is having too many harmful side effects.

So here is my proposal to you: would you like to have a conversation about this? We can do it over email, if you like, so we can each take our time with thoughtful responses, and it doesn't interfere too much with daily life. And, at the end of it, we'll have a complete email record of everything that was said during our correspondence.

Of course, I could discuss this all with friends who tend to agree with me, but that doesn't get me very far. I'm much more interested in having these discussions with (smart) people whose opinions are unlikely to align with my own. In some ways, what I'm proposing is a kind of debate, but I don't really like that term. The goal is not to have a contest where one of us "wins." To be honest, I don't even have the illusion that I can succeed in changing your mind about anything. Instead, what I really want is to better understand where the heart of the disagreement lies. Where is there a true intellectual conflict? And where might there be common ground?

In particular, I think there is a lot of misunderstanding of what the strongest positions are on the opposing sides. As is so often the case these days, we all end up in echo chambers gleefully tearing apart the weakest versions of our opponents' arguments. (Kind of like Pinker in "The Blank Slate"; that book is unreadable because the whole thing is structured as a take-down of an extreme and highly unrealistic position that no one actually believes. Someone should really tell that man to make a bit of an effort to deal with the strongest arguments on the other side, not the weakest. Surely Pinker is smart enough to handle a real challenge to his positions.)

OK, enough said. You get my point. So, coming back to my proposal, I hope you will at least give it a serious consideration. If you agree to this conversation, we should of course negotiate some terms. My only starting condition is this: we keep the conversation more or less confidential unless we mutually agree to make some (or all) of it public. I.e., no more leaking of emails without the other person's explicit permission. I strongly believe that a certain level of trust is necessary in any productive conversation. When people are scared to write things in emails for fear that their words may later be used against them, it has a chilling effect on free speech.

Anyway, please take a few days to think about it and let me know. I understand these things are time consuming, and you may not be interested. In that case, I would appreciate you letting me know this as well.

Sincerely,
Carina