

Personalizing equity, diversity and inclusion: How my experiences shaped my views



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I was recently appointed to the role of a Chair of the CMS EDI committee. What qualifies me for the job? What are the qualities that one should possess? What does EDI mean to me and where do I fit in?

I am a woman. I am white, Eastern European, an immigrant, a mother. I can list many nouns and adjectives that describe me; some of them will place me into a historically underrepresented group (in math) and some of them will place me into the majority.

I am direct, candid, opinionated, outspoken, present. These qualities often metamorphose into their unfavourable counterparts when my gender gets applied to my traits: loud, rude, argumentative, cocky (how ironic). I wasn't always this way. The ability to speak up took me a while to grow into. Along the way many, I think people believed that I was naturally outspoken, whereas to this day bringing up a contentious topic to a meeting makes my heart race and my accent thicken. I do not enjoy conflict or bringing up uncomfortable topics to the table, but I also don't avoid it like a plague. In my experience, discussion avoidance results in a dysfunctional or toxic atmosphere. On the contrary, a productive (although likely initially uncomfortable) conversation allows for a richer understanding of all viewpoints and offers ways forward.

So in the spirit of sharing, below I collected a few stories to highlight some of my experiences and how they form my way of thinking about equity, diversity and inclusion.

I was hired at UFV in 2016 when I was pregnant (ask me about that experience in person), so I started my position on maternity leave. I should point out that at UFV the entire Faculty of Science and Math and Stats Department in particular has a much higher ratio of women than other departments that I have been a part of, so having a female colleague and working around parental leaves is not uncommon. Despite being on leave, I came in for department and faculty meetings to meet people and get a head start on my work. And just like that one negative student review that ruins the whole batch, there was one experience I remember vividly despite many positive ones. My first Faculty of Science meeting, a senior colleague came up and, laughingly, said "We hired you months ago, when are you actually going to come in and start teaching?". I brushed it off as a joke. Next meeting, he (let's call him Bob) said the same thing; I walked away. Third time it happened, he still clearly thought it was funny; I told him it was not okay to keep asking me, that I was taking my legal leave and I needn't be ashamed about it. He looked surprised, and I got worried... It was a senior colleague that might later be on my tenure committee and would carry on the sentiment that "I did nothing" for the first year that I was hired, even though I was on legal leave.

The fact that Bob made those remarks in the presence of other faculty didn't result in anyone else speaking out. I also told this story to a few other colleagues, most of whom (in fact, all but one) brushed it off as "Bob being Bob". Why are we so quick to dismiss inappropriate behaviour as a minor

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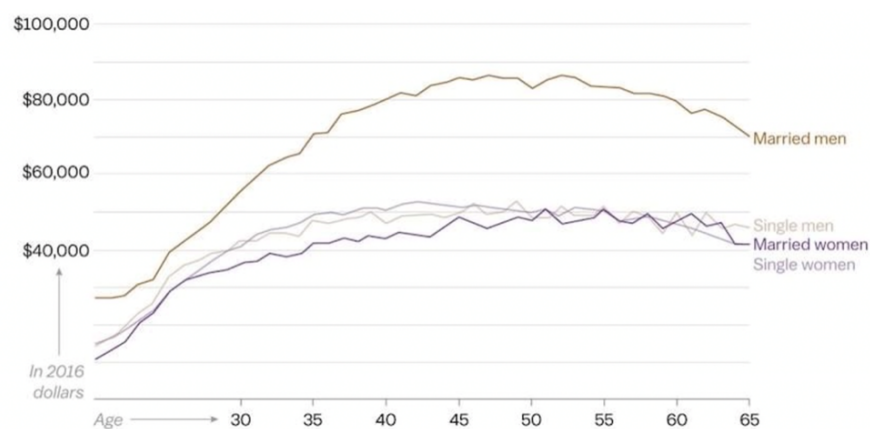
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A diverse population does not mean the environment is inclusive and it does not automatically make it so.

Last term I was teaching Calculus 1 for Business. On the midterm, I gave students this graph that illustrates the data for marriage and gender salary income of employed men and women with a high school diploma:



Source: IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota

Several parts of the question asked the students to compute average and instantaneous rates of change of salaries of various groups. Last (bonus) part asked: "Give one possible real-world explanation for the salary gaps between married men and everyone else." Vast majority of my students are first-years, the Gen Z's that we sometimes consider being "too woke". Their answers surprised me. About half the class came up with reasons why men get paid more than women, which of course doesn't answer the question of why married men get paid more than all other groups, including single men; but at least this is not offensive. The other half of the class gave reasons that divided into roughly 3 categories:

- men feel the responsibilities of raising a family;
- men work harder/more;
- wealthy men are more attractive as potential spouses.

"Married men tend to work more hours since they provide for their whole family", "married men are the breadwinner of the family", "married men work longer hours than women", "men work full-time or more whereas women work less", "most of the married women do not seek higher salaries if their husband works", "men who are rich are more likely to marry as compared to everyone else", "men with higher wages are more likely to get married"... Is it me or does this sound like women do not feel the need to support their families, women are not career-motivated and women's choice of life partners is based on the size of their paycheck?

What is striking is that all of the answers focused on men and the end reason why they make more money (take on more responsibilities, more work hours, look out for promotion opportunities, etc.) None of the answers presented the situation from the point of view of either single men or women, e.g. what allows married men to accelerate their career and make more money than any other group.

My response to the class can be summarized by this tweet:

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We tend to focus on what one group of people can do rather than what other groups of people are unable to do and why. We need to consider the situation (data, information, an event, an initiative) from points of view of different groups of people. We need to pay attention not only to what is present or what is presented, but also to what is specifically absent.

Inclusion is creating and supporting spaces for meaningful and successful participation of all.

I first joined CMS in summer 2006. I just began my Master's degree at Simon Fraser University. A friend of mine went to the Canadian Undergraduate Math Conference earlier that year and wanted to bring the next edition of the event to SFU. I happily agreed to be on the organizing committee. I went to my first CMS meeting in winter 2006 in Toronto and I don't believe I missed a single CMS meeting for over a decade after that. I served as a chair of the Student Committee and participated in Board of Directors meetings in that role, I started student poster sessions at CMS meetings and created a student newsletter Notes from the Margin, I was a member of Education Committee and several of its subcommittees, I organized 6 CMS Math Camps, I became Editor-in-Chief of Crux Mathematicorum in 2013 (while still a PhD student), I rid the journal of its year-long backlog and eventually moved it to be an open-access publication freely available online. I organized numerous CMS sessions, panels and events, I was an education lead organizing CMS's first-ever online meeting during the pandemic.

In 2020, a friend and a colleague decided to nominate me for the CMS Graham Wright Distinguished Service Award. My initial reaction was "have I really done enough to be a worthy recipient?" I wasn't even tenured yet and it felt like a career award. But then I thought of the list above (which isn't even compete).

I received the Award. I was subsequently named a CMS Fellow (I'm told I'm the youngest person to be named a CMS Fellow so far). The best part of being recognized was getting emails from people I haven't talked to in a while and didn't have a specific reason to connect to. But one congratulatory email was to the point as it summed up my feelings and fears regarding the initial nomination: "Having served on these kinds of panels before, I know that giving the award to a (very!) young colleague is a tough sell."

All awards encourage participation from all groups — it is clearly stated on the CMS Awards pages. But how does this encouragement look like on the receiving end? Here is the table from MOSAIC column by Habiba Kadiri that I think we need to look at carefully and look at often (<https://notes.math.ca/en/article/title-about-the-necessity-of-collecting-data-to-improve-edi-in-mathematics/>):

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Awards	Women (since beginning)	Women (since 2012)
Fellowship of the CMS [19] (since 2018)	11.8%	11.8%
David Borwein Distinguished Career Award [20] (since 2006)	0%	0%
Graham Wright Award for Distinguished Service [21] (since 1995)	10.3%	20%
Adrien Pouliot Award [22] (since 1995)	14.3%	20%
Excellence in Teaching Award [23] (since 2004)	16.7%	20%
Coxeter James Prize [24] (since 1978)	4.5%	0%
Jeffery-Williams Prize [25] (since 1968)	1.9%	0%
CMS Blair Spearman Doctoral Prize [26] (since 1997)	7.7%	0%
G. de B. Robinson Award [27] (since 1995)	15.4%	27.3%
CRM-Fields/CRM-Fields-PIMS Prize [28] (since 1995)	7.4%	10%

We need to understand the problem before we can solve it: do various under-represented groups not apply? Are they found lacking in excellence? Are they not qualified because of some systemic barriers?

Let's take Coxeter-James Prize. Its eligibility states that "Nominations may be made up to ten years from the candidate's Ph.D" (and until recently I believe that is all it stated — it now allows for exceptions with explained eligible leaves of absence). Women who have kids and take parental leaves (as they do at a much higher rate than men) are likely to do so exactly during the first 10 post-PhD years, which means that for each child a female candidate's eligibility and body of work are reduced by at least a year. And it doesn't stop at gender. A person with a disability or an ongoing medical condition might take time to attend to their health. An Indigenous person with strong ties to their community might take time off after their PhD to reconnect before rejoining academia. A 10-year cut off is a systemic barrier that disproportionately affects certain groups.

If you are on any kind of committee (hiring, awards, CMS or otherwise), start asking questions about eligibility and the transparency of the competition process as understanding hidden constraints is the first step in closing glaring gaps.

Equity is fairness in context. It starts with access, but it does not end there.

My favourite course to teach is History of Mathematics, Math 410 at UFV. This course is not about teaching math chronologically or examining ancient math techniques in a vacuum. It is about exploring mathematical ideas as embedded in culture and environment, dispelling both the Eurocentric and the impassive view of the development of mathematics.

It is the hardest course to teach. I am neither a historian nor an anthropologist. I am as much of a learner as my students. For this reason, the course

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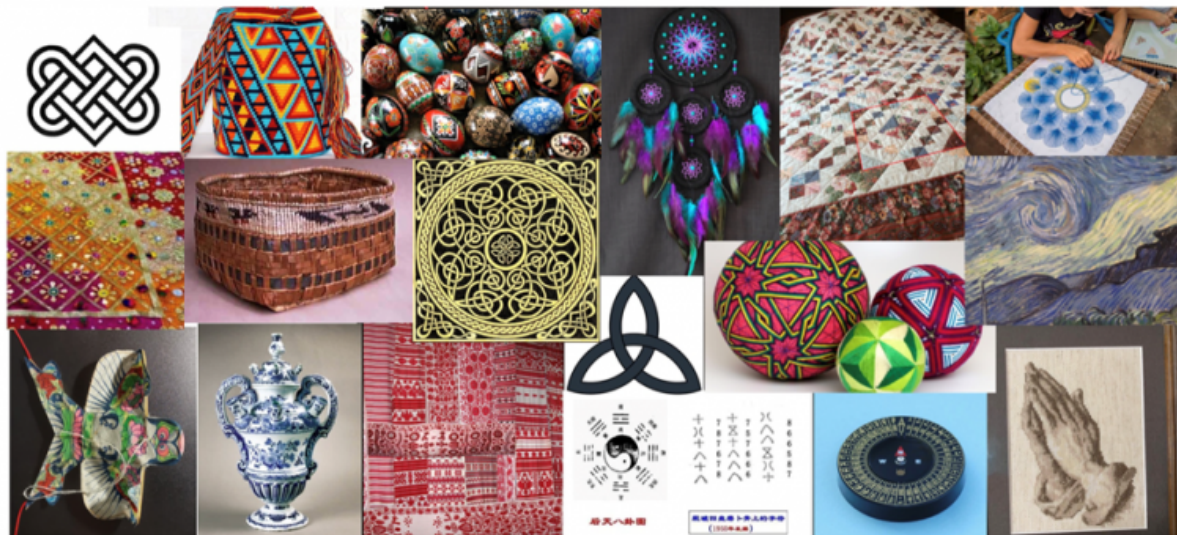
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development of mathematics as a human endeavour, to discuss the surrounding context of the time and place, to see math as a social science. They discover that there is much more humanity to the subject whose technical side they enjoy.

On the first assignment, I ask them to find a piece of art or craft native to the land where they were born or belonging to their family's cultural heritage and write about the tradition as well as what mathematics they see in it. Here was the tapestry of my last class's heritage:



So many different backgrounds, yet we all found beauty (and math) in each others'. A simple activity uncovered the rich culture already present in the classroom.

Diversity describes differences and similarities: it refers to the wide range of differences that exist among individuals, but it is rooted in shared experiences and values.

I will close with some of my favourite go-to's. I am a podcast and book omnivore: while I have favourite genres, my reading/listening list looks eclectic to say the least. But here are some of my favourites:

- "Braiding Sweetgrass" by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- "Invisible Women" by Caroline Criado Perez and her blog
- "Math and Science across cultures" by Bazin et al.
- "Mathematics for human flourishing" by Francis Su
- "Code Talker" by Chester Nez with Judith Schiless Avila
- podcast "Opinionated History of Mathematics"
- blog "Alice in Numberland" by Alice Silverberg

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