

For some girls, the problem with math is that they're good at it

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A few years ago, I told Donald Kennedy, editor of the journal *Science*, that I wanted to write an essay for his publication. It would say, "Anyone who thinks that sexism is no longer a problem in science has never been the first woman science editor of *The New York Times*."

I never wrote the essay. But the continuing furor over Dr Lawrence H. Summers's remarks on women and science reminds me why I thought of it.

For those who missed it, Dr Summers, the president of Harvard, told a conference last month on women and science that people worried about the relative dearth of women in the upper ranks of science should consider the possibility that women simply cannot hack it, that their genes or the wiring of their brains somehow leave them less fit than men for math, and therefore for science.

Dr Summers has since said clearly that he does not believe that girls are intellectually less able than boys. But maybe his original suggestion was right. If we ever figure out exactly what goes on inside the brain, or how our genes shape our abilities, we may find out that men and women do indeed differ in fundamental ways.

But there are other possibilities we should consider first. One of them is the damage done by the idea that there is something wrong about a girl or woman who is really good at math.

I first encountered this thinking as a seventh grader who was scarred for life when my class in an experimental state school for brainiacs was given a mathematics aptitude test. The results were posted and everyone found out I had scored several years ahead of the next brightest kid. A girl really good

in math! What a freak! I resolved then and there on a career in journalism.

I encountered the attitude again shortly after I became science editor, taking up a position I was to hold from 1997 to 2003. I went to the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a convention that attracts thousands of researchers and teachers. My name tag listed my new position, and the scientists at the meeting all seemed to have the same reaction when they read it: "You're the new science editor of *The New York Times*!?"

At first I was deluded enough to think they meant I was much too delightful a person for such a heavy-duty job. In fact, they were shocked it had been given to a woman.

This point was driven home a few weeks later when, at a dinner for scientific eminences, a colleague introduced me to one of the nation's leading neuroscientists. "Oh yes," the scientist murmured, as he scanned the room clearly ignoring me. "Who is the new science editor of *The New York Times*, that twerpy little girl in short skirts?"

Dumbfounded, I replied, "That would be me."

A few weeks after that I was in another group of scientific eminences, this one at a luncheon at the Waldorf. The spokeswoman for the group that organized the event introduced me to one of the group's most eminent guests, a leading figure in American science policy.

"Oh," he said kindly but abstractedly, "you work for *The New York Times*. How nice." The spokeswoman explained, again, that I was the newspaper's science editor. "An editor," he said. "How nice." The woman explained again, but again he could not take it in. "Oh, science," he said, "How nice." At this point the spokeswoman lost

patience. She grabbed the honored guest by both shoulders, put her face a few inches away from his and shouted at him – “She’s it!”

Not long after, I answered the office telephone, and the caller, a (male) scientist, asked to speak to several of my colleagues, all male and all out. “May I help you?” I inquired. “No, no, no,” he replied. “I don’t want to talk to you, I want to talk to someone important!”

Even at the time, I could laugh at these experiences. After all, I was a grown-up person who could take care of herself. (I informed the caller that all the men he wanted to talk to worked for me, and then I hung up. As for Dr Twerpy, he should know that he was not the first man to refer to me professionally as “that little girl.” I reported on the doings of the other one until he was indicted.)

But the memories of the seventh grader are still not funny. Neither is it amusing to reflect on what happened to a college friend who was the only student in her section to pass linear algebra, the course the math department typically used to separate the sheep from the mathematical goats. Talk about stigma! She changed her major to American civilization.

Another friend, graduating as a math major, was advised not to bother applying for

a graduate research assistantship because they were not given to women. She eventually earned a doctorate in math, but one of her early forays into the job market ended abruptly when she was told she should stay home with her husband rather than seek employment out of town.

Experiences like hers – the outright, out-loud dashing of a promising mathematician’s hopes simply because of her sex – are no longer the norm. At least I hope not. But they are enough, by themselves, to tell us why there are relatively few women in the upper ranks of science and mathematics today.

Meanwhile, as researchers have abundantly documented, women continue to suffer little slights and little disadvantages, everything from ridicule in high school to problems with child care, to a much greater degree than their male cohorts. After 10 or 15 years, these little things can add up to real roadblocks.

So if I wanted to address the relative lack of women in the upper reaches of science, here is where I would start. By the time these problems are eliminated, maybe we’ll know what really goes on inside the brain and inside the chromosomes. Then it will be time to wonder if women are inherently less fit for math and science.