

Which results on gender and science every mathematician should know

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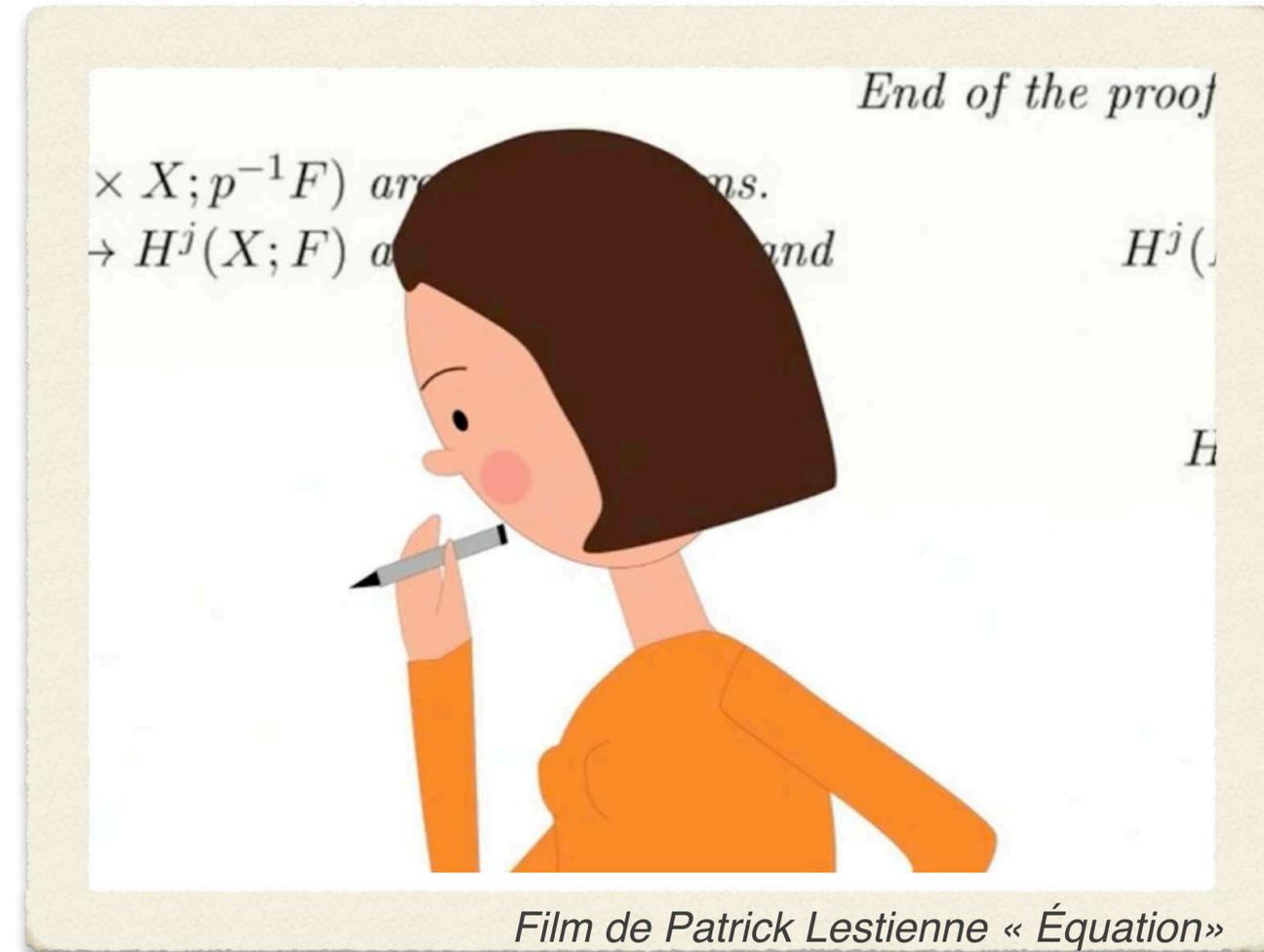
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Collaborations in algebra, representation theory and ethics
ENS de Lyon, 29 October 2025

Mathematics as cultural practice

1. Mathematical outreach : « I will share mathematics with everybody ! » VS a public full of retired male engineers...
2. Early career researcher : « A joyful mathematical community ! » VS loneliness as a PhD and a post-doc
3. My « favorite » question : How is it to be a woman in mathematics ?
4. Mathematics and the Empire



Plan of the talk

Question : What does the underrepresentation of women, people coming from lower social classes and minorities in mathematics say about how mathematics is constructed today as a cultural practice ?

- A. Absent from math : how much and why ?
(numbers and epistemologies)
- B. Construction of Western mathematical subjectivity



Denis van Waerbaeke « Voyages au pays des maths »

Main scientific references



Laurence Broze



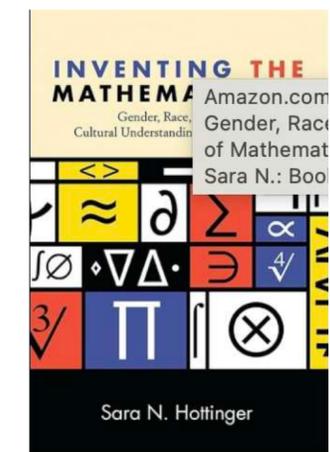
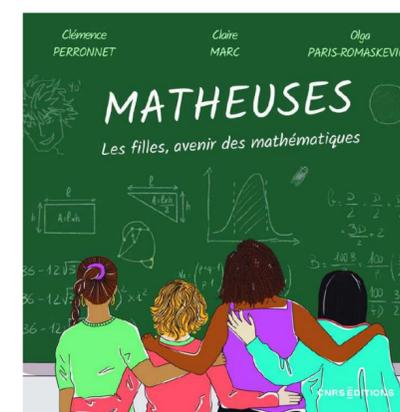
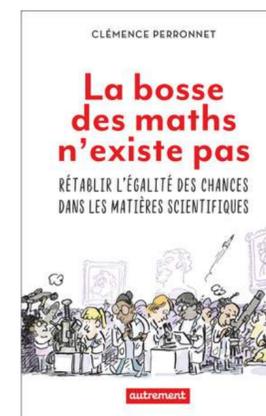
Isabelle Régnier



Clémence Perronnet



Sara N. Hottinger

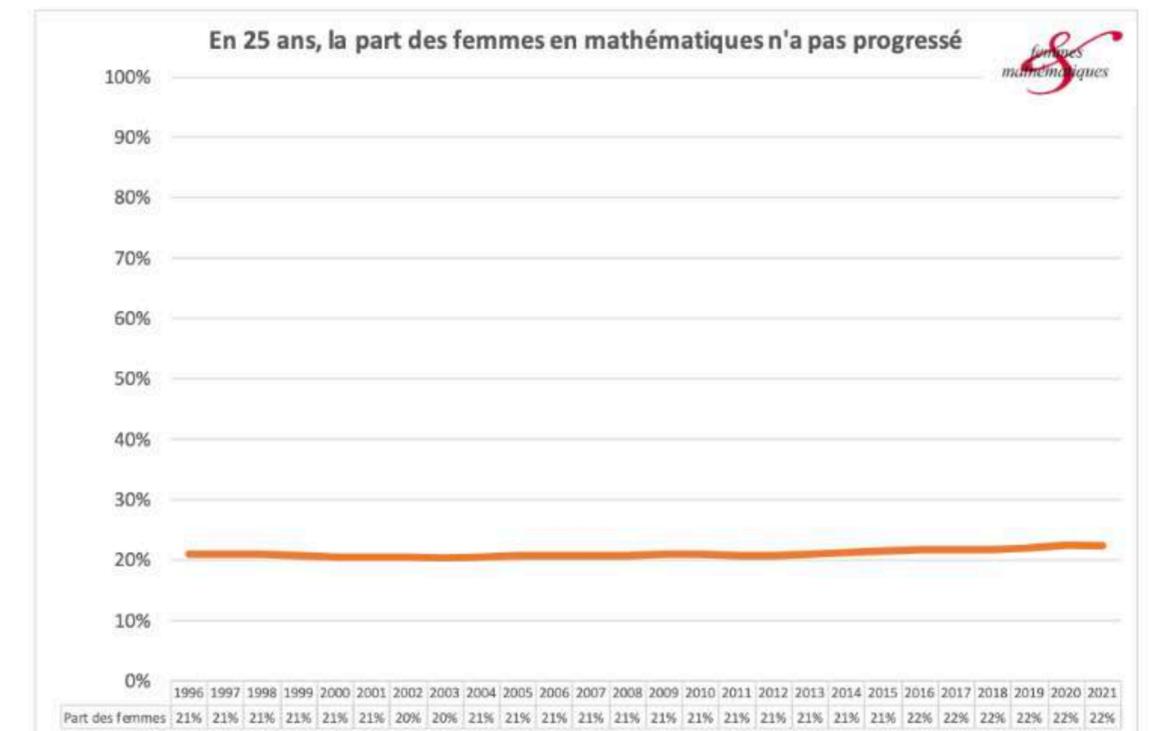


“You have found only one proof,” said a history professor to Kolmogorov. “That is not enough for a historian. You need at least five proofs.” At that moment, Kolmogorov decided to change his concentration to mathematics, where one proof would suffice.

Studying mathematics in France

- **54%** girls in French schools
- but only **30%** enroll into math programs in universities and « classes préparatoires »
- **18%** in « Grandes Écoles » (Polytechnique, ENS, Centrale, Les Mines)
- **23%** of female PhD students
- **14%** of researchers in fundamental mathematics

20% of women in math since 1996
with not much change (and proportions getting slightly worse for CR and DR in CNRS)



21% en 1996 et 22% en 2021 (référence : 40% pour l'ensemble des disciplines).

Laurence Broze

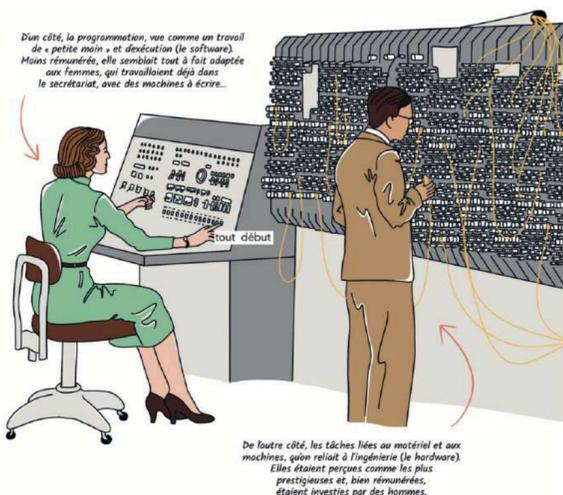
Not only women disappear from mathematical research careers

Social inequality (France)

- 30% of school students coming from lower social class in France
 - but only 17% enroll into « classes préparatoires »
 - 10% in « Grandes Écoles »
 - less than 7% in PhD programs

Racial inequality (United States)

- 17% of Black students and 25% of Hispanic students in United States
 - but only 11% and 18% of them follow « Algebra 1 »
 - 5% and 11% study maths in first year University programme
 - 4% and 6% have a PhD in math



Claire Marc pour « Matheuses »

Women, people coming from lower social classes and minorities are underrepresented in mathematics, informatics, physics and engineering. It is both a problem for **social and economic justice** and for **science**.

Social psychology : stereotype threat and implicit bias

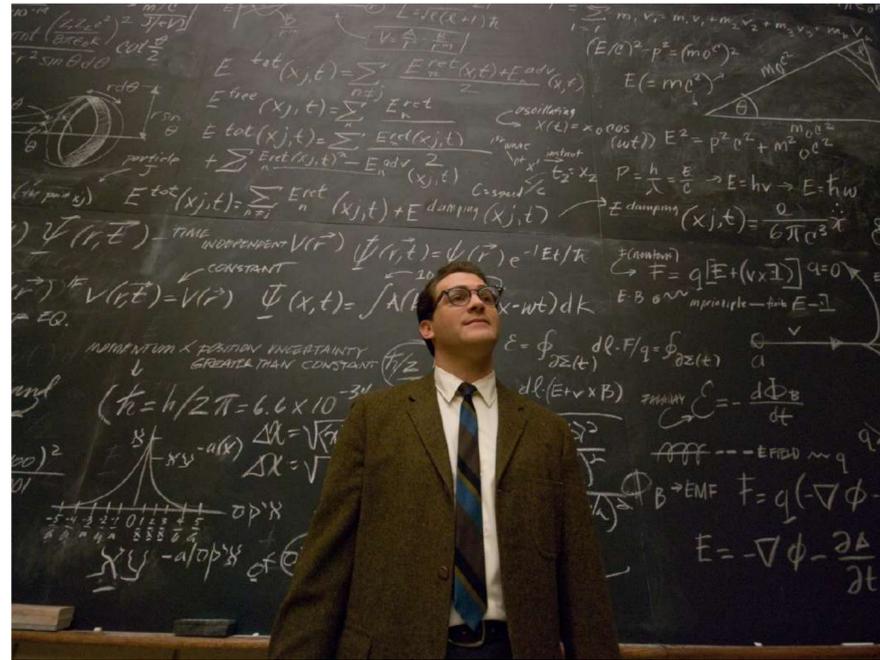
A **social stereotype** is a set of beliefs — about the traits, behaviors, or attributes — shared by a social group about the characteristics or attributes of another group (or of one's own group). Stereotypes are **social in origin and function**, not just individual opinions: they help groups make sense of social reality, justify social hierarchies, and maintain group identities.

(Leyens, Yzerbut, Schadron, 1994)

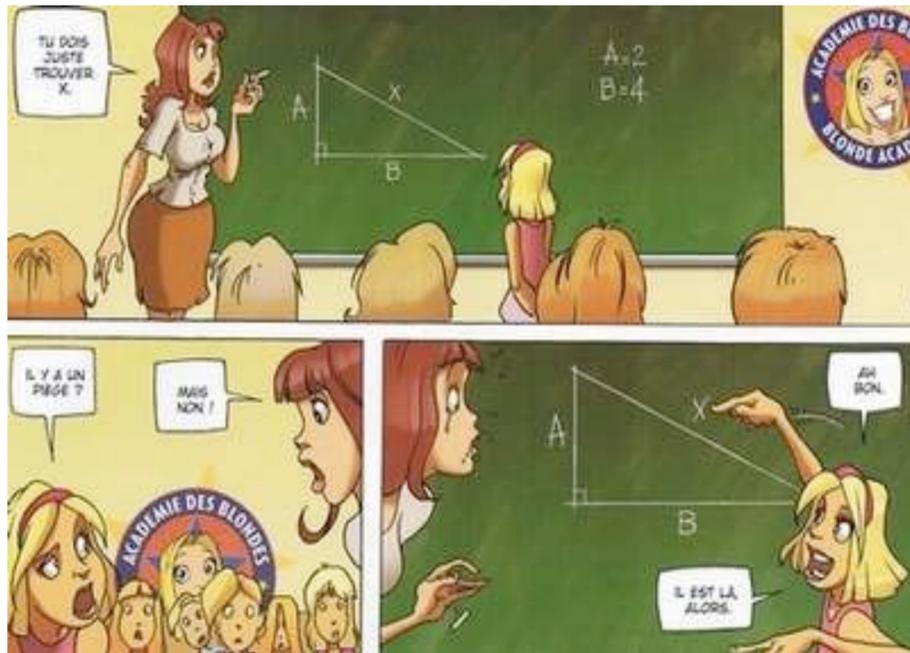
They are based on a process of social categorification — **functional** but **simplifying!**



Social psychology : stereotype threat and implicit bias



- Social gender stereotypes construct « men » in a binary opposition to « women » :
- **men** : competitive, rational, good in math and bad at reading, caring for others and dealing with human interactions
 - **women** : sensitive, emotional, bad in math and good at reading, bad in logic and spatial orientation as well as leadership, good for care



There is a lot of research on how social stereotypes influence their « targets » but also their « carriers ».

Social psychology : stereotype threat

1. Let C denote an arbitrary constant. Then $\int e^{ex} dx =$

- (A) $e^{ex-1} + C$ (B) $e^{ex} + C$ (C) $e^{ex+1} + C$ (D) $xe^{ex} + C$ (E) $\frac{e^{ex+1}}{ex+1} + C$

The first study that coined the term *stereotype threat* studied women's math performance.

- GRE mathematics test (difficult enough)
- Completed at least one semester of calculus and received at least a B
- Two groups : 1 — standard « We are developing some new tests that we are evaluating across a large group of University of Michigan students. Today you will be taking a math test. » ; 2 — falsification: « The test had never shown gender differences in the past. »

Spencer, Steele, & Quinn (1999). Stereotype Threat and Women's Math Performance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35

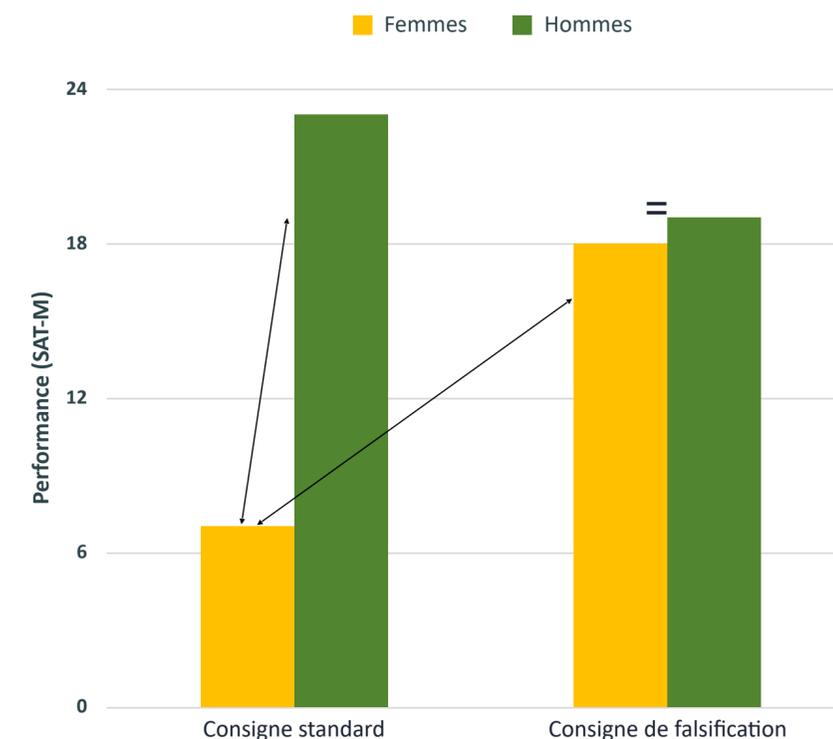
Social psychology : stereotype threat

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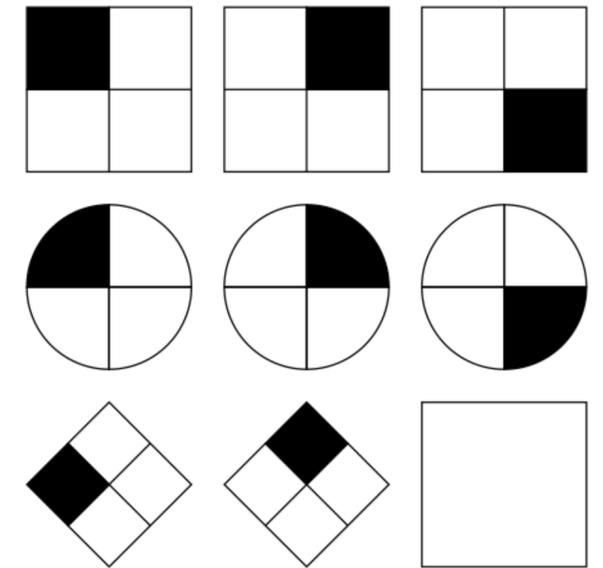


Spencer, Steele, & Quinn (1999). Stereotype Threat and Women's Math Performance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 35

Social psychology : stereotype threat

This test has been replicated in the context of Grandes Écoles by Régner et al. (Raven's Progressive Matrices) : same results for women, men perform less well in a « falsification » group.

Régner, I., Smeding, A., Gimmig, D., Thinus-Blanc, C., Monteil, J.M., & Huguet, P. (2010). Individual Differences in Working Memory Moderate Stereotype-Threat Effects. *Psychological Science, 21*, 1646-1648.



When one induces stereotype threat by invoking a comparison with a minority group stereotyped to excel at math (Asians), White men performed worse than the controls.

Aronson, J., Lustina, M. J., Good, C., Keough, K., Steele, C. M., & Brown, J. (1999). When White men can't do math: Necessary and sufficient factors in stereotype threat. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 35*(1), 29–46.

Social psychology : implicit bias

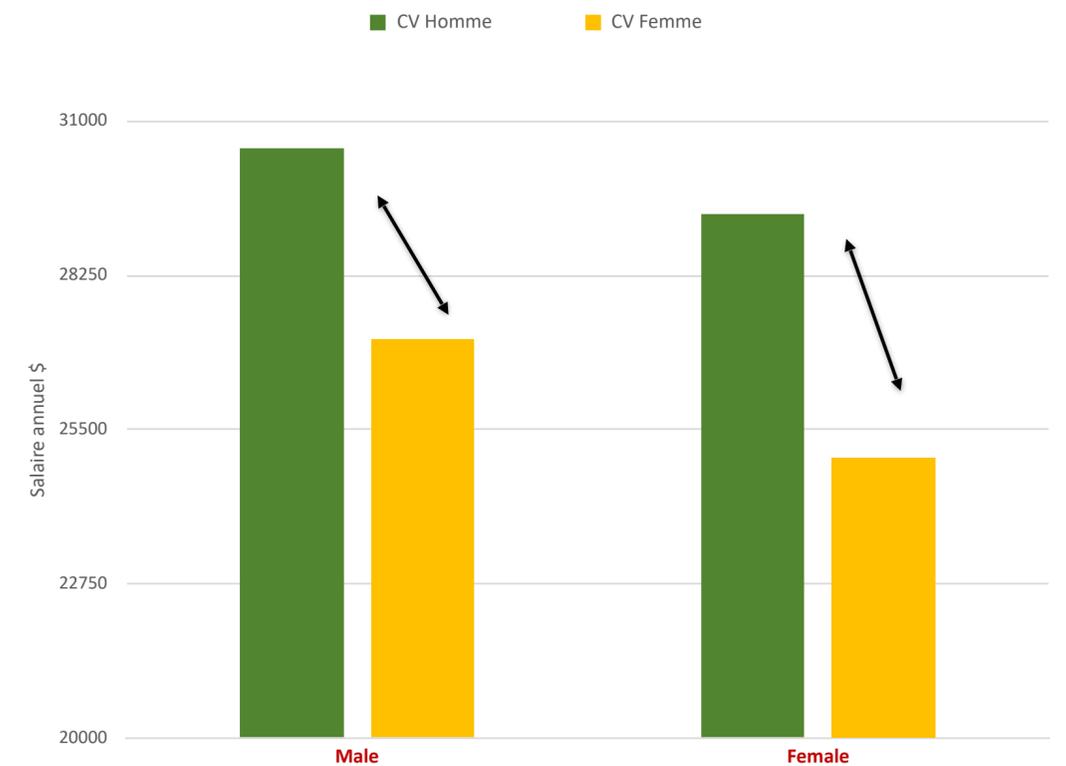
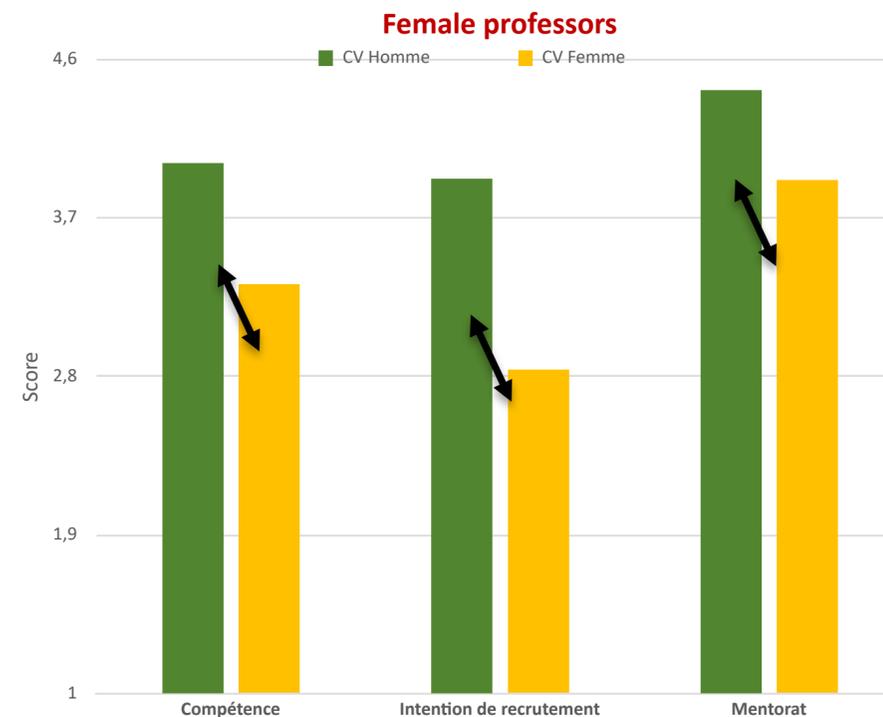
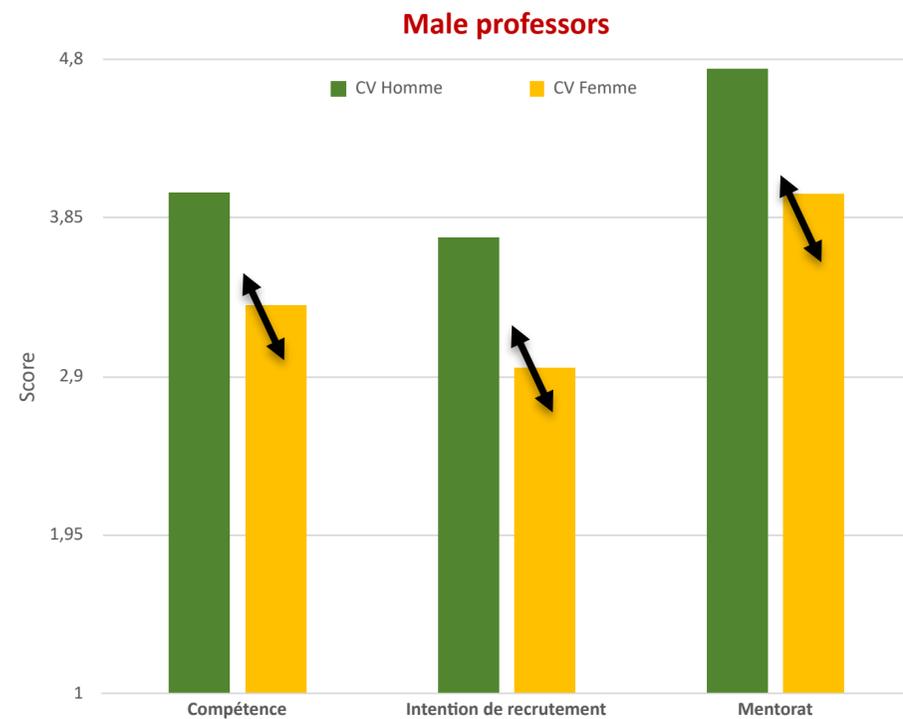
- 127 professors (men and women) in biology, chemistry or physics in 6 American universities
- a candidate for scientific management position
- John VS Jennifer

Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman (2012). *PNAS*, 109, 16474-16479

Social psychology : implicit bias

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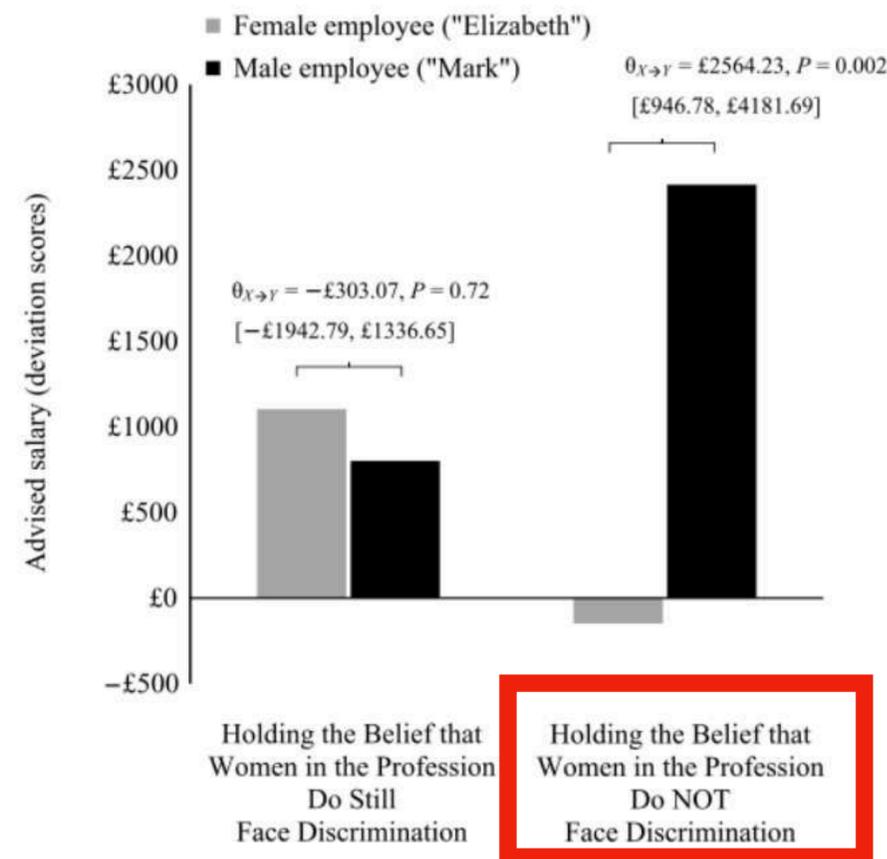
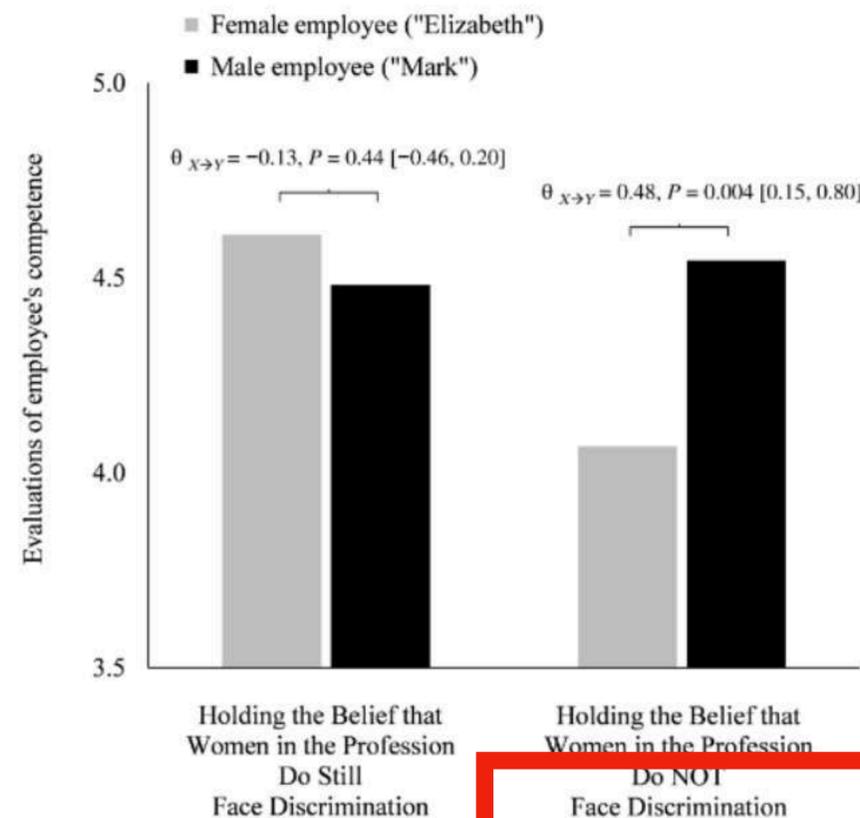
Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman (2012). *PNAS*, 109, 16474-16479



(c) Isabelle Régner

Social psychology : implicit bias

SCIENCE ADVANCES | RESEARCH ARTICLE



Gender bias persists, Perpetuated by those who think it is not happening.

nature human behaviour 26 August 2019 ARTICLES <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0686-3>

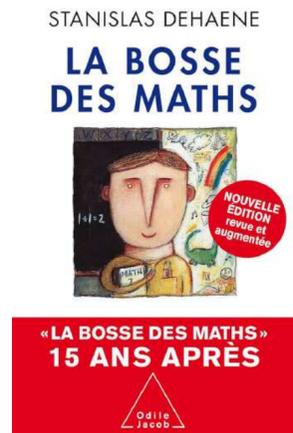
Committees with implicit biases promote fewer women when they do not believe gender bias exists

Isabelle Régner^{1*}, Catherine Thinus-Blanc¹, Agnès Netter², Toni Schmader^{3,5} and Pascal Huguet^{4,5*}

Begeny, C. T., Ryan, M. K., Moss-Racusin, C. A., & Ravetz, G. (2020). In some professions, women have become well represented, yet gender bias persists- Perpetuated by those who think it is not happening. Science advances, 6(26), eaba7814.

Sociology : mathematics as social practice

Sociology studies « how it happens that people do what they do »
— human social behaviour, from general tendencies to
« exceptions », in the underlying structure of social stratification,
and power relations, with qualitative and quantitative techniques.



« Research in mathematics is socially situated :
70 % of mathematicians have a parent from
upper class (20 % of society) and 43 % have a
parent who is teacher or researcher. (Bernard
Zarca, *Mathematician : elitist and masculine
profession*, 2006, France)



Sociology of scientific culture is interested in
how the interest and talent in mathematics are
socially constructed and negotiated with identity
through family heritage, cultural practices
(extracurricular activities for example),
socialisation, etc.

Notre problème est le suivant :
pourquoi y a-t-il si peu de filles en
mathématiques alors qu'elles ont les
mêmes capacités cognitives que les
garçons et y réussissent aussi bien
(voire mieux) qu'eux pendant leurs
études ?

Notre hypothèse principale
est que les filles sont exclues
des mathématiques dont la
structuration sociale est à la
fois sexiste, élitiste
et raciste.

Notre méthodologie
est présentée dans
le chapitre suivant :
« L'enquête sur le terrain ».



Claire Marc pour « Matheuses »

« Cicadas » school in Marseille, CIRRM

1. One week introduction to research in mathematics and informatics for high-school girls

2. Sociological study by Clémence Perronnet and Alice Pavie (1h30-2h interviews of 45 participants + observation at 2 editions of the school)



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Pourquoi certaines lycéennes choisissent-elles les maths en première quand la majorité de leurs camarades les abandonnent ?

Comment vivent-elles leurs études scientifiques ?

Qu'est-ce qui détermine leur choix d'orientation en fin de première puis dans les études supérieures ?



Pourquoi ont-elles choisi de venir ?

Qui sont les filles qui participent au stage ?

Le stage change-t-il le regard des filles sur les maths et sur les inégalités ?

Est-ce une bonne idée de proposer ce stage aux filles uniquement, en non-mixité ?

Est-il efficace pour encourager les lycéennes à continuer les maths en terminale et après ?

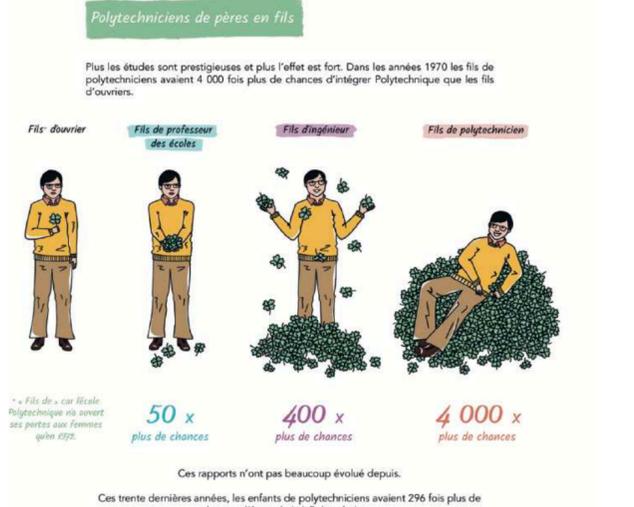
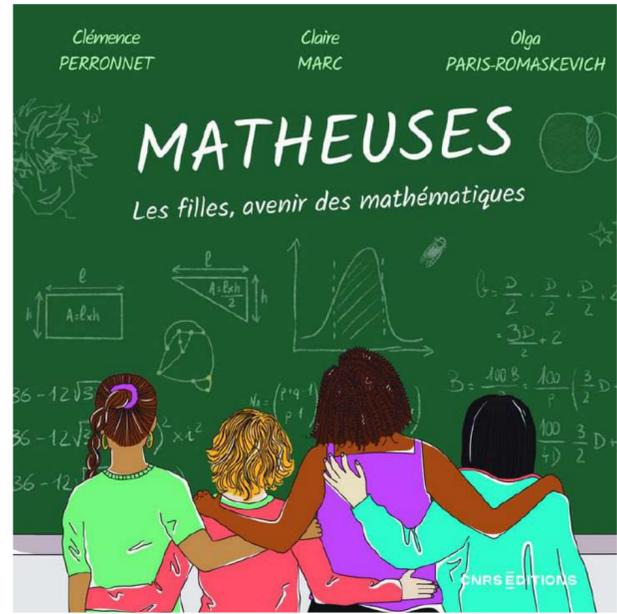
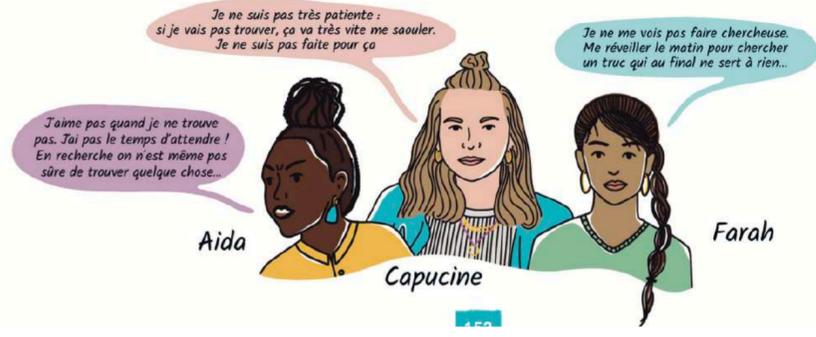


Claire Marc pour « Matheuses »

Mathgirls : a book on sociology of mathematical practice (with C. Perronnet and C. Marc) — in French

LIST OF CHAPTERS

1. Does one need to have scientists as parents to become a mathematician ?
2. Does one need to be intelligent to be a mathematician?
3. Being strong in math, can it be learned or we are either born with it or not?
4. Why girls are more present in medicine studies than in math?
5. Why informatics pushes girls away?
6. Why girls are less confident than boys in their math capacities?
7. Is math reserved to elites?
8. What about racism ?
9. Are girls-only events a useful tool for equality?
10. Are role-models creating scientific aspirations in girls?



Matheuses et ingénieures de mères en filles

Pour les femmes, l'héritage est encore plus important. Par exemple, les étudiantes en maths américaines viennent davantage de familles scientifiques que les étudiants :

- 69 % ont un parent diplômé en sciences vs 57 % des étudiants ;
- 22 % ont un parent diplômé en maths vs 10 % des étudiants

Il est rare de devenir une femme scientifique sans venir d'une famille scientifique.

L'héritage se fait plus souvent de mères en filles. La sociologue Catherine Marry a montré que la « réussite improbable » des femmes ingénieures est déterminée par une excellence scientifique et un double soutien :

- le soutien **complet**, de mères qui ont suivi des études en sciences et **transmis ce goût** à leurs filles en démontrant qu'on peut être scientifique sans perdre sa féminité ;
- le soutien de pères qui leur portent une **estime intellectuelle** et les encouragent.

Les sciences s'héritent davantage que d'autres disciplines. À l'École normale supérieure par exemple, 79 % des étudiantes en sciences ont une mère scientifique (vs 67 % des étudiantes littéraires), alors que 54 % des étudiantes littéraires ont des mères littéraires.

Avoir une mère scientifique est déterminant pour le choix de carrière des filles : pour devenir une femme scientifique, mieux vaut avoir une mère scientifique.

Le problème de Maya
ou calcul des aires des polygones

Solution p. 216

Les polygones sont des formes géométriques constituées d'une ligne brisée. Sur une grille carrée, ils sont très sympas à dessiner !

À part un carré, je me suis demandé quels autres polygones d'aire 1 je pouvais dessiner... Et j'en ai trouvé plein !

MAINTENANT, VOICI MA COLLECTION DE FIGURES D'AIRE 1 :

Légende :

- Points sur le bord (b)
- Points à l'intérieur (i)
- Aire (A)

Soit i le nombre de points à l'intérieur, b le nombre de points sur le bord et A l'aire du polygone.

Est-ce que toute figure qui a 5 points sur le bord et 0 à l'intérieur est forcément d'aire 2 ? Et est-ce que le nombre de points à l'intérieur (i) et le nombre de points sur le bord (b) sont les seules informations nécessaires pour calculer l'aire (A) d'un polygone ?

Pour répondre à cette question, j'ai d'abord calculé l'aire A de ma figure en la découpant en morceaux dont je connais l'aire :

Rectangles, Triangles rectangles, Triangles

Bon, cette technique était vraiment longue. Je me suis donc demandé : si existait pas une formule pour calculer l'aire (A) à partir du nombre de points à l'intérieur (i) et du nombre de points sur le bord (b).

DEFI n° 2 : Quelle formule Maya a-t-elle trouvée pour exprimer A en fonction de i et b ?

Maintenant que j'ai trouvé une super formule qui me simplifie la vie, je me demande ce que ça fait avec des polygones un peu plus complexes... du genre avec des trous (t) ?

DEFI n° 3 : Comment adapter la formule pour des polygones avec des trous ?

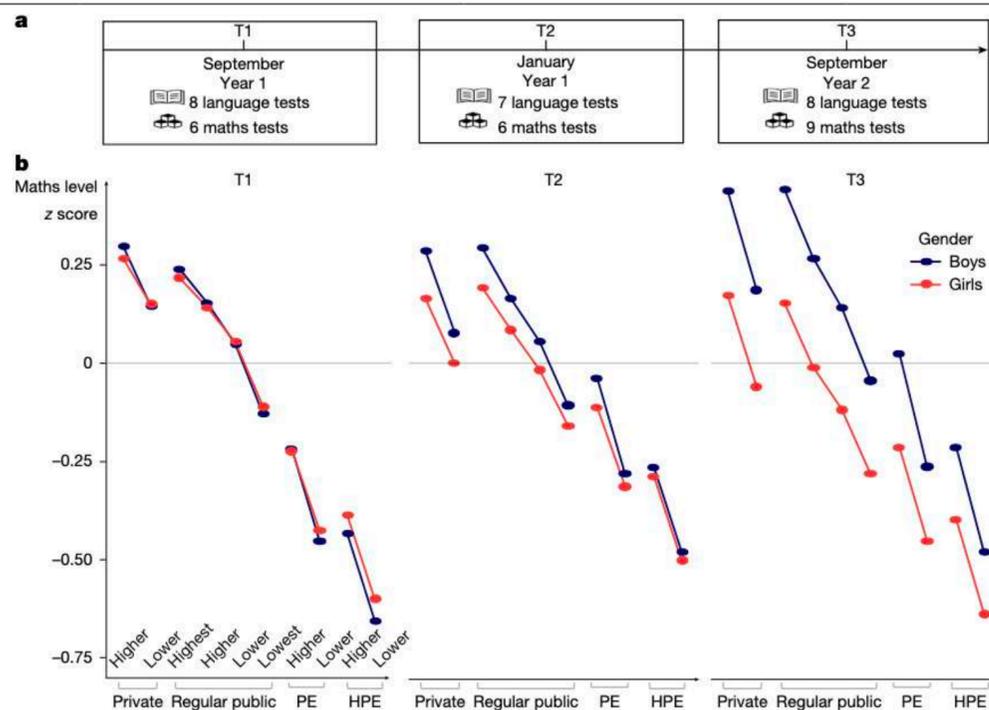
Why so few girls invest themselves in mathematics ?

Sociology : mathematical brilliance and masculinity

Before 6 years old (before school and formal math training), girls and boys think that their gender is « more intelligent » and math performances are equal. **Starting school**, both consider that men are more intelligent than women. This positions them differently with respect to mathematical knowledge. (Perronnet, *Matheuses*, 2024)

The gender gap is created in **4 months**.

« Many women and girls who have done very well in mathematics are nevertheless unable to understand themselves as good in mathematics, they are *successful but not succeeding*. Girls are praised for following the rules. But success in mathematics is defined by a student's desire and ability to challenge the accepted practices in the field.» (Walkerdine, *Counting girls out*, Routledge, 1998)



« I have a lot of capacities, I do not work much and do not use my intelligence. I had at least 15/20 without working at all, there is no merit to that. I feel guilty sometimes, I feel I am taking the place of someone else. » Cécile

Les filles « brillantes », des exceptions qui confirment la règle

Cécile fait partie de la minorité de filles diagnostiquées intellectuellement précoces et HPI : elle est perçue comme « intelligente » – et même « surdouée ». Ses notes ont beau ne pas être régulières (elle passe de 12 à 19 de moyenne en maths d'un trimestre à l'autre), elle a le sentiment d'avoir des facilités et de peu travailler.

Cécile

- père ingénieur
- mère sage-femme

Je fais partie de ces gens qui ont beaucoup de capacités, mais qui ont tendance à ne pas bosser et à ne pas les exploiter.

Les réactions de son entourage sont ambivalentes. Sa mère perçoit négativement son diagnostic, mais son professeur de maths valorise ses aptitudes :

Ma mère n'est pas enchantée que je sois HPI. Elle me le reproche très souvent : elle dit qu'elle a l'impression de vivre avec un adulte et qu'elle déteste ça.

Mon prof dit qu'il est plus intéressé par ceux qui ont des bons résultats d'eux-mêmes sans rien faire plutôt que par ceux qui vont pas forcément des capacités en maths mais qui sont juste très bons pour travailler.

Au bout du compte, ses capacités lui semblent peu légitimes et insatisfaisantes car elles contredisent l'idée de mérite :

En maths, j'étais au moins à 15 sans avoir rien travaillé. C'est pas bien, y'a pas de mérite à ça. Je ne suis pas contente de ça.

Ma mère m'a appris qu'il faut beaucoup travailler pour avoir les choses : tout doit se mériter. (...)

Ça me fait me sentir un peu coupable parfois, parce que j'ai l'impression de prendre la place de quelqu'un d'autre. Je voudrais bosser également, pour mériter aussi.

Why so few girls invest themselves in mathematics ?

Sociology : sexist violence and its denial



Claire Marc pour « Matheuses »

« All girls regularly hear remarks from their classmates, family and professors. These remarks constitute **sexist violence**.

In France, at least **18%** of school girls were victims of sexist slurs and **10%** were victims of behaviours of sexual character.

- 1 in 10 students in engineering school has been sexually assaulted
- 1 in 4 students (**23%**) in Polytechnique and Centrale Supélec has been sexually assaulted
- 1 in 2 (**49%**) female researchers has been sexually harassed

This violence in schools, universities, laboratories is denied and minimised. This provokes guilt and/or disengagement from science. »

(Clémence Perronnet, *Matheuses*, 2024)

Mathematics as culture : mathematical subjectivity

How do we think and speak about mathematics today ?

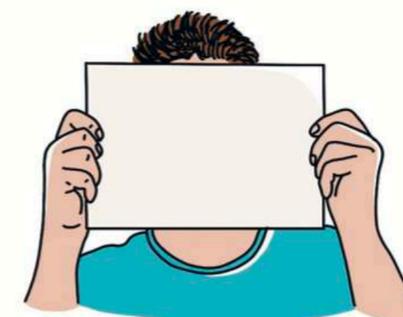
- « *Mathematics is everywhere and accessible to anybody (universal).* » Two reasons why this discourse might be problematic : denial of injustice of access to math and hierarchisation of knowledge.
- « *Mathematics is a cumulative science.* » This justifies erasing from memory previous achievements that do not enter the linear narrative.
- *Internalist/platonic approach* (discover what is already there) VS *externalist approach* (heroic mathematical subjectivity) (S. Hottinger, 2016). Either an identity of a mathematician is totally erased behind the discovery, or it is a hero changing the world... In any case, it is not a woman, nor a non-White person nor a poor person.



James Mavnard Fields



Huao Duminil-Copin Fields



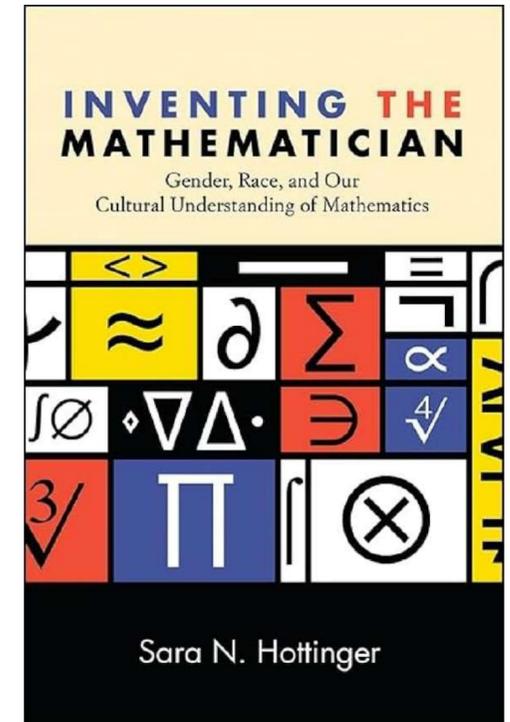
Mathematics as culture : other mathematical subjectivities, other ways to practice mathematics?

Sara N. Hottinger gives insight into the key role mathematical subjectivity plays in the construction of Western subjectivity and West itself. She argues that « this is precisely why mathematical subjectivity is only available to those who **benefit** from the dominant discursive regimes at the heart of Western culture. »

In professional universe of mathematicians, the detachment from real life problems and valorisation of beauty and elegance of maths gets more recognition than that of its usefulness. This posture dissimulates the conditions (mostly, economical comfort) that permit this detachment. »

C. Perronnet, Matheuses, 2024

A norm of mathematical subjectivity is linked to the Others it seeks to exclude. Hottinger argues that in order for mathematics to be accessible to all excluded groups, **multiple alternative mathematical subjectivities** are to be constructed.



« Many understand mathematics to be separate from human concerns and call mathematical knowledge value-free. I argue that we cling to this understanding of mathematics - a rational, universal system that relies on logic to arrive at truth — because it is a key component of how West understands itself. »

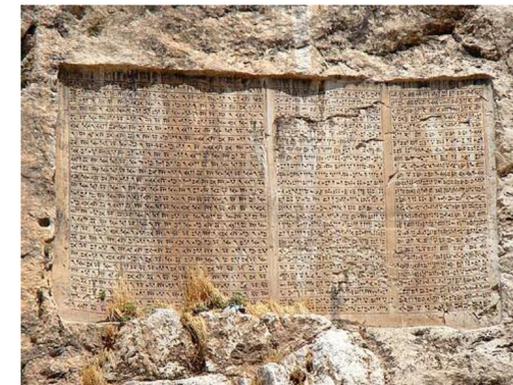
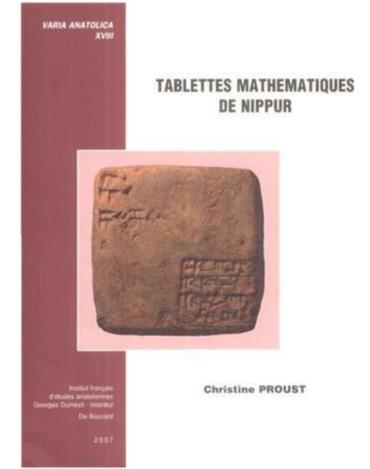
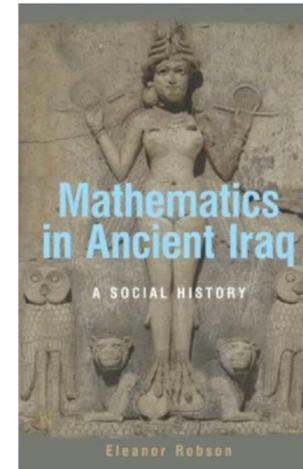
S. Nottinger, 2016

Mathematics and the appropriation of the West : example of Babylonian mathematics

Mathematics textbooks either dismiss Babylonian mathematics or present it as proto-Greek (via « domestication » of translations). Eleanor Robson argues that the comparison of Babylon and Greek mathematics shows few points of commonality, with no convincing historical arguments for transmission.

In sum, then, we are dealing with two, perhaps three, very different mathematical cultures, even if we dismiss matters of language, script, media, and numeration as surface presentation. **Old Babylonian mathematics is inherently metric: all parameters have both quantity and measure, explicit or implicit, as well as dimension.** Later Babylonian mathematics is increasingly arithmetic, as geometrical operations are replaced by arithmetical ones. Both varieties, however, are entirely inductive: solutions to specific problems serve as generic examples from which generalisations are inferred (not always correctly); and **starting assumptions (axioms or postulates) are not stated explicitly.** In contrast, the **classical Greek tradition is inherently geometric: parameters have dimension but no quantity or measure.** It is also **heavily deductive and axiomatic:** the emphasis is on deriving general proofs from explicitly stated theorems and axioms.

Textbooks are hence reducing complex historical narrative to a simple tale of mathematical progress. Robson characterises the erasure of Babylonian identity from the history of mathematics as a form of Western appropriation of the Middle Eastern past.



Conclusion

Mathematics is constructed today as a cultural and social practice in a way that it systematically excludes women, lower class people and minorities. Research in social psychology, sociology, history and cultural studies not only helps to understand how this happens but shows **the way to change**.

Fighting implicit bias :

1. Be conscious that **it exists**
2. Know that one might be influenced by these biases and understand how this influence is produced (automatisms of the brain)
3. Know that it is possible to control these automatisms : by **being alert** in the important phases of evaluation process, standardising criteria and regulating the discussion

Fighting any form of discrimination :

1. Be conscious that **it exists** and that it is a massive structural problem and not « unique cases, in some other lab, not ours »
2. Stop the violence and intervene if you see it happening, do not stay « neutral »



Changing the culture of mathematics:

1. Collective structural change of practices
2. Rejecting naturalising approaches of men and women, but also of taste, talent and merit
3. Welcome, study and construct alternative mathematical subjectivities
4. Develop interdisciplinary knowledge on critical history and epistemology of mathematics

It's not since one is brilliant that one becomes good at math. It's much more the inverse : once you invest yourself in mathematics, others recognise your talent and intelligence, **because mathematics has symbolic and social power.** (Clémence Perronnet, 2024, *Matheuses*)

Discussion



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*Olga Pochinka, professor of mathematics in Nizhny Novgorod,
dancing with her daughter at a conference she organised*