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Diversity statement

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People are different and this is good. For me, diversity is about deep appreciation of this difference in all its aspects: culture, geography, language, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, neurodiversity, and others. All of these aspects combined contribute to the diversity of worldviews and thoughts that form the essence of academic life.

Diversity is bliss but also a challenge. Our ancestors lived in close-knit tribes and we, modern humans, inherited the preference to interact with like-minded individuals (our tribe) and be afraid or suspicious of those who are different from us (foreigners) (Sapolsky, 2017). This ancient force underlies xenophobia and the fact that marginalized groups remain marginalized. It also explains the lack of diversity and traces of discrimination even in such open-minded and progressive environments as academia and, in particular, economics (Bayer and Rouse, 2016). Consequently, building an inclusive diverse community requires a conscious effort from its members to make everyone — especially, those coming from historically disadvantaged groups or minorities — feel welcome and a part of the community.

My thoughts on diversity are based on my values and shaped by my own experience and discussions with colleagues and friends. I believe that power comes with responsibility: those of us who happen to be in an advantageous position are responsible for helping those who are not. Tracing this principle back to questions of diversity, we conclude that it is a responsibility of those who are historically in the advantageous position — say, white cisgender men — to help create an environment where those who are not — say, LGBTQ+ persons of color — feel welcome and comfortable. The principle is applicable more broadly to those who require protection, feel isolated, or have needs that may be hard to speak up about. I hope to contribute to making academia more perceptive by being perceptive myself.

Being a postdoc, first in Israel and then in the US, there were moments when I felt a lack of belonging. This was a negligible dose of what people from disadvantaged backgrounds have felt throughout their lives. But even this dose was enough to make me realize how important the effort of my colleagues and friends was to make me feel welcome. Thanks to them the dose was negligible. In my future carrier, I will commit to such a proactive openness and attention to students' and colleagues' needs.

Academia can be made more inclusive by promoting the institution of faculty-student and student-student mentorship. The mentor-mentee relationship is less formal than the advisor-student one and can help students from marginalized groups to develop a sense of belonging and to speak more openly about their concerns and feelings. I have supervised three and mentored many students, more than half of whom have been women. In the future, I plan to expand this effort by advising and mentoring students from underrepresented groups.

My experience as a mentor, discussions with women colleagues, and multiple conversations with my wife (she belongs to an ethnic minority) helped me realize that the main obstacle to building an inclusive community is unconscious discrimination. The problem with unconscious discrimination is

that it may not be clear that the act of discrimination took place as it is hidden in exclusionary behavior and microaggressions. For example, women get more harsh feedback from seminar attendees (Dupas et al., 2021) and from journals (Card et al., 2020) and tend to be described as hard-working rather than talented in recommendation letters (Eberhardt et al., 2022). Women, especially in STEM fields, may feel isolated as their male peers hang out without them. These problems are likely to be common to all underrepresented groups. Coping with unconscious discrimination requires constant reflection about our motives and a change of mindset. A step towards this change is changing the language we use, as many discriminatory patterns are reinforced through common collocations (Wu, 2018; Bolukbasi et al., 2016). To develop my own awareness, in all my talks, lectures, and recent papers, I refer to agents and players as "she" instead of common "he"[1] and learn to use inclusive language. Such practice is a small step toward the ideal of a thriving diverse community, but big goals are achieved in a sequence of small steps.

Mentorship has also highlighted to me another aspect of diversity that plays an important role in the classroom environment and academia as a whole: the diversity of talents. It can broadly be considered a part of neurodiversity. Talents are idiosyncratic and academia is a home for people with unique strengths, which sometimes come with unique weaknesses. For example, students demonstrating exceptional performance in one type of question may fall far behind in the other. As a teacher and supervisor, I am a proponent of an individual approach and believe that we need to focus on discovering and nurturing strengths and be flexible enough to accommodate cognitive differences.

References

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[1] My inspiration was a book by Osborne and Rubinstein (1994) available both in "she" and "he" versions. Note that a more appropriate gender-neutral choice of "they" may refer to both individuals, groups, and even inanimate objects leading to confusion.