

# A Rant About Women

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<http://www.shirky.com/weblog/2010/01/a-rant-about-women/>

So I get email from a good former student, applying for a job and asking for a recommendation. “Sure”, I say, “Tell me what you think I should say.” I then get a draft letter back in which the student has described their work and fitness for the job in terms so superlative it would make an Assistant Brand Manager blush.

So I write my letter, looking over the student’s self-assessment and toning it down so that it sounds like it’s coming from a person and not a PR department, and send it off. And then, as I get over my annoyance, I realize that, by overstating their abilities, the student has probably gotten the best letter out of me they could have gotten.

Now, can you guess the gender of the student involved?

Of course you can. My home, the Interactive Telecommunications Program at NYU, is fairly gender-balanced, and I’ve taught about as many women as men over the last decade. In theory, the gender of my former student should be a coin-toss. In practice, I might as well have given him the pseudonym Moustache McMasculine for all the mystery there was. And I’ve grown increasingly worried that most of the women in the department, past or present, simply couldn’t write a letter like that.

This worry isn’t about psychology; I’m not concerned that women don’t engage in enough building of self-confidence or self-esteem. I’m worried about something much simpler: not enough women have what it takes to behave like arrogant self-aggrandizing jerks.

Remember David Hampton, the con artist immortalized in “Six Degrees of Separation”, who pretended he was Sydney Poitier’s son? He lied his way into restaurants and clubs, managed to borrow money, and crashed in celebrity guest rooms. He didn’t miss the fact that he was taking a risk, or that he might suffer. He just didn’t care.

It’s not that women will be better off being con artists; a lot of con artists aren’t better off being con artists either. It’s just that until women have role models who are willing to risk incarceration to get ahead, they’ll miss out on channelling smaller amounts of self-promoting con artistry to get what they want, and if they can’t do that, they’ll get less of what they want than they want.

There is no upper limit to the risks men are willing to take in order to succeed, and if there is an upper limit for women, they will succeed less. They will also end up in jail less, but I don’t think we get the rewards without the risks.

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When I was 19 and three days into my freshman year, I went to see Bill Warfel, the head of grad theater design (my chosen profession, back in the day), to ask if I could enroll in a design course. He asked me two questions. The first was “How’s your drawing?” Not so good, I replied. (I could barely draw in those days.) “OK, how’s your drafting?” I realized this was it. I could either go for a set design or lighting design course, and since I couldn’t draw or draft well, I couldn’t take either.

“My drafting’s fine”, I said.

*That’s* the kind of behavior I mean. I sat in the office of someone I admired and feared, someone who was the gatekeeper for something I wanted, and I lied to his face. We talked some more and then he said “Ok, you can take my class.” And I ran to the local art supply place and bought a drafting board, since I had to start practicing.

That got me in the door. I learned to draft, Bill became my teacher and mentor, and four years later I moved to New York and started doing my own design work. I can’t say my ability to earn a living in that fickle profession was because of my behavior in Bill’s office, but I can say it was because I was willing to do that *kind* of thing. The difference between me and David Hampton isn’t that he’s a con artist and I’m not; the difference is that I only told lies I could live up to, and I knew when to stop. That’s not a different type of behavior, it’s just a different amount.

And it looks to me like women in general, and the women whose educations I am responsible for in particular, are often lousy at those kinds of behaviors, even when the situation calls for it. They aren’t just bad at behaving like arrogant self-aggrandizing jerks. They are bad at behaving like self-promoting narcissists, anti-social obsessives, or pompous blowhards, even a little bit, even temporarily, even when it would be in their best interests to do so. Whatever bad things you can say about those behaviors, you can’t say they are underrepresented among people who have changed the world.

Now this is asking women to behave more like men, but so what? We ask people to cross gender lines all the time. We’re in the middle of a generations-long project to encourage men to be better listeners and more sensitive partners, to take more account of others’ feelings and to let out our own feelings more. Similarly, I see colleges spending time and effort teaching women strategies for self-defense, including direct physical aggression. I sometimes wonder what would happen, though, if my college spent as much effort teaching women self-advancement as self-defense.

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Some of the reason these strategies succeed is because we live in a world where women are discriminated against. However, even in an ideal future, self-promotion will be a skill that produces disproportionate rewards, and if skill at self-promotion remains

disproportionately male, those rewards will as well. This isn't because of oppression, it's because of freedom.

Citizens of the developed world have an unprecedented amount of freedom to choose how we live, which means we experience life as a giant distributed discovery problem: What should I do? Where should I work? Who should I spend my time with? In most cases, there is no right answer, just tradeoffs. Many of these tradeoffs happen in the market; for everything from what you should eat to where you should live, there is a menu of options, and between your preferences and your budget, you'll make a choice.

Some markets, though, are two-sided — while you are weighing your options, those options are also weighing you. People fortunate enough to have those options quickly discover that it's not enough to decide you want to go to Swarthmore, or get money out of Kleiner Perkins. Those institutions must also decide if they will have you.

Some of the most important opportunities we have are in two-sided markets: education and employment, contracts and loans, grants and prizes. And the institutions that offer these opportunities operate in an environment where accurate information is hard to come by. One of their main sources of judgment is asking the candidate directly: Tell us why we should admit you. Tell us why we should hire you. Tell us why we should give you a grant. Tell us why we should promote you.

In these circumstances, people who don't raise their hands don't get called on, and people who raise their hands timidly get called on less. Some of this is because assertive people get noticed more easily, but some of it is because raising your hand is itself a high-cost signal that you are willing to risk public failure in order to try something.

That in turn correlates with many of the skills the candidate will need to actually do the work — to recruit colleagues and raise money, to motivate participants and convince skeptics, to persevere in the face of both obstacles and ridicule. Institutions assessing the fitness of candidates, in other words, often select self-promoters because self-promotion is tied to other characteristics needed for success.

It's tempting to imagine that women could be forceful and self-confident without being arrogant or jerky, but that's a false hope, because it's other people who get to decide when they think you're a jerk, and trying to stay under that threshold means giving those people veto power over your actions. To put yourself forward as someone good enough to do interesting things is, by definition, to expose yourself to all kinds of negative judgments, and as far as I can tell, the fact that other people get to decide what they think of your behavior leaves only two strategies for not suffering from those judgments: not doing anything, or not caring about the reaction.

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Not caring works surprisingly well. Another of my great former students, now a peer and a friend, saw a request from a magazine reporter doing a tech story and looking for examples. My friend, who'd previously been too quiet about her work, decided to write the reporter and say "My work is awesome. You should write about it."

The reporter looked at her work and wrote back saying “Your work is indeed awesome, and I will write about it. I also have to tell you you are the only woman who suggested her own work. Men do that all the time, but women wait for someone else to recommend them.” My friend stopped waiting, and now her work is getting the attention it deserves.

If you walked into my department at NYU, you wouldn’t say “Oh my, look how much more talented the men are than the women.” The level and variety of creative energy in the place is still breathtaking to me, and it’s not divided by gender. However, you would be justified in saying “I bet that the students who get famous five years from now will include more men than women”, because that’s what happens, year after year. My friend talking to the reporter remains the sad exception.

Part of this sorting out of careers is sexism, but part of it is that men are just better at being arrogant, and less concerned about people thinking we’re stupid (often correctly, it should be noted) for trying things we’re not qualified for.

Now I don’t know what to do about this problem. (The essence of a rant, in fact, is that the ranter has no idea how to fix the thing being ranted about.) What I do know is this: it would be good if more women see interesting opportunities that they might not be qualified for, opportunities which they might in fact fuck up if they try to take them on, and then try to take them on. It would be good if more women got in the habit of raising their hands and saying “I can do that. Sign me up. My work is awesome,” no matter how many people that behavior upsets.