THE VIEWPOINT COLUMN

BY

STEFAN SCHMID

TU Berlin, Germany
stefan.schmid@tu-berlin.de

Prizes and Prejudice

Sophie Huiberts

Department of Computer Science, Columbia University, USA

Abstract

In academia we have a wide assortment of awards, but we have even more work deserving of such recognition. What work and which people get recognized has significant influence on who gets hired and who gets funded. I examine how awards' recipients are selected in our communities and how this relates to the status of women in our field.

When we as academics give a prize or award to a person or group, this serves to uplift the recipient and to indicate that their work is valued in the community. This signal of appreciation then benefits the recipient and their area of research; a best poster award can be a nice boost to the CV of an early career researcher, while the Gödel Prize commands the admiration of colleagues, future PhD candidates, and higher-ups in our own universities. Although awards are meant to reflect existing appreciation for certain projects and people, they also create and reinforce this appreciation in turn.

Every year there is a lot of work deserving of recognition, and only so many awards to go around. This implies that scientific merit alone is not enough to deterimine a winner, hence other considerations will inevitably play a part. What are these other factors of influence and what is their impact on our discipline? While there are many valid answers to this question worth examining, we will focus on gender in this article. The phenomena discussed here are not unique to gender; we could find and replace the gendered qualifiers in this text by a variety of others and a very similar discussion can be held.

Most awards in our discipline are superficially gender-neutral: no formal rule forbids them from being given to researchers of certain genders. Despite this formal pretense, I argue that, in practice, many awards serve to maintain the gendered status quo in which women are at a serious disadvantage compared to men. To illustrate this, I will describe three prizes, big and small, and how I perceive them as unfairly elevating already-privileged researchers over their minoritized peers.

I want to emphasize that this article is intended as a complaint towards those with the power to affect prize-giving. There is no doubt in my mind that the recipients of the prizes mentioned have each done high-quality work that is worthy of the recognition they received.

1 "This prize is too small to worry about inclusion"

In my home country of the Netherlands, we have an organization uniting discrete math, algorithms, algebra and number theory, and every year they organize two symposia. At these events, there are always many PhD candidates speaking. At the end of the symposium, a 'best PhD student presentation prize' is handed out by a famous Dutch mathematician and a photo of the prize ceremony is published in the Dutch mathematical trade magazine.

The prize committee consists of just this one mathematician; let's call him FM for his role as Famous Mathematician. If you talk about FM to anyone who is not an old man, you will soon learn of his documented history of egregious sexist remarks. Thus, it should not be a surprise to learn that all recipients in the prize's history have been men, in sharp contrast to the population of PhD speakers.[1]

At this point you might be asking 'why is this allowed to happen? Why does the symposium give FM its platform and the time and attention of its attendees? Don't the organizers know about this guy's reputation?' If so, then you are in luck, because I asked these exact questions to one of the organizers.

The organizer I spoke to is an old man. Throughout our conversation, I got the impression that he did not know about FM's reputation and he seemed unwilling to believe the stories about FM's sexism when I mentioned those. (I later learned that I was not the first person to mention this to him.) And anyway, I was told, this is not a serious prize, nobody pays attention to it, so no big deal even if it were biased.

This last point seems especially callous, considering the impact of prizes on an early-career researcher's CV. Every recipient whose CV I found online mentioned receiving the "Famous Mathematician PhD Presentation Prize". Without directing blame at the awardees, we can observe that this prize serves to launder FM's sexism and turn it into a respectable line on the CVs of selected men.

What this story illustrates is that there are bad actors in our communities, that the people in power fail to recognize them as such, and that this system results in a concrete career advantage for men over anyone else.

2 "This prize has gender-oblivious rules"

The Turing Award is embarrassing, and all CS researchers ought to feel ashamed about our professional association, the ACM, allowing this award to exist in its current form. The last woman to win a Turing Award was Shafi Goldwasser, a decade ago, after whom fifteen men have gone on to win this prize. In its 56 year

---

[1] If your immediate reaction was to think that perhaps the men were all better speakers, I encourage you to reflect on that impulse and consider if this might be your biases talking.

history, we can count three women and one hundred and twenty-eight men among the recipients.

This problem extends far beyond the committee making the final call: the bias is built into every step of the process. Candidates for the Turing Award are generated from nominations from the computing community, and every year many nominations are received by the ACM. However, the committee receives only about one woman nominee every five years.[2] That is not a typo: one woman nominee every five years. The theory community alone could easily nominate dozens of excellent women every year, each a deserving Turing Award recipient. Let's not mince words here: anyone who believes the Turing Award to be worth anything, who was around to nominate people over the past decades, and who failed to nominate a woman, is at fault.

Neither are the ACM and its award committee free from blame. It is beyond obvious that the current nomination system is not functioning and must be completely reworked. Significant action is required from ACM leadership in order to make the Turing Award capable of being anywhere near equitable. At this moment the Turing Award is failing all of us and harming our discipline. For as long as the nomination and selection procedures are not overhauled, we must recognize the Turing Award for what it is: not a prize for excellent researchers in general, but primarily a prize for excellent *male* researchers.

3 "This prize is for senior researchers"

Today, there are disproportionately many men in theoretical computer science. This is bad and frustrating to those of marginalized genders, both those in the field right now and those who might enter the field in the future. However, the ratio is even more skewed among senior researchers, reflecting the fact that the situation was even worse in decades past.

This ought to prompt caution in those who institute prizes for senior researchers. One example of such a prize is a Test of Time (ToT) Award: awarded to the best papers published in a venue 10, 20 or 30 years ago. FOCS introduced its ToT Award in 2019, whereas STOC introduced its ToT Award in 2021. These recent innovations can be expected to, at best, reflect the gender bias of the past and reproduce it in the distribution of power in the present day. At worst, we can expect outcomes like the ToT Awards of FOCS 2019, where I count awards for ten men and zero women. In a time when more women are entering the field than ever before, I question whether it is appropriate for the community to institute awards that can only be given to senior researchers. What benefit is created by such an

---

[2]Source: `https://youtu.be/lJtdOsjy59A?t=5560`

award, and what harm might it cause?

That said, I observe that the ToT Awards have been getting better over time. As mentioned, I counted ten men and zero women recipients for FOCS 2019, but for FOCS 2021 this goes up to fifteen men and two women. While the playing field is still far from equal, I believe that this shift signals an awareness of the problem and a willingness to improve our situation.

4 Closing remarks

Today we learned that prizes not just reflect attitudes from the past and present, but also have part in shaping those of the future. The consequences of this were illustrated by way of three prizes — three out of many — with a history of ignoring women's contributions to the field. Our field is in a bad place when it comes to diversity, and our prizes are not setting us up for a brighter future.

Removing bad actors from their power is a necessary step towards stopping this ongoing harm to our communities, but it is merely the most obvious measure we can take. We are all part of this system producing bad outcomes, and we can not afford to believe the fairy tale that superficial gender-neutrality is the way out.

I finish with a call to action. For everyone, I suggest to make a list of people who would deserve a prize nomination or two. Leave out any men, and keep going until you have at least a few dozen names. The next time you are in a position to nominate anyone for a prize, award or fellowship, use the list. For anyone on a prize committee, I urge you to study which factors contribute to unfair biases and work with your fellow committee members to counteract these forces. There is plenty of literature out there which can guide you on this path. And anyone who is hiring or otherwise in a position to judge people on the basis of their CVs, I ask you to recognize the reality that the presence or absence of signals of prestige reflects much more than academic merit alone. Let this recognition inform your decisions going forward.