

Unhiding History

I read with a large degree of pleasure Alexey Glutsyuk's review of *Naming Infinity: A True Story of Religious Mysticism and Mathematical Creativity* by Loren Graham and Jean-Michel Kantor [*Notices*, January 2014]. The book is a serious attempt to look at both the mathematical and nonmathematical contexts in which mathematics is created and does an excellent job of both aspects of its task. Similarly, the review did an excellent job of discussing most of the major themes of the book. But the reviewer, in describing the relationship of Alexandrov and Kolmogorov as "friends and collaborators" does a disservice to Graham and Kantor, and to the unsuspecting reader of the review. Graham and Kantor make a very clear case that Alexandrov and Kolmogorov (and, also, Alexandrov and Urysohn) were lovers, and that the tenuous position of homosexuals in Russian society (which, sadly, continues to this day) shaped at least some of their political behavior, in particular Alexandrov's and Kolmogorov's denunciations of Luzin and Solzhenitsyn. If Glutsyuk has evidence to challenge Graham's and Kantor's claims, he should mention it. But simply avoiding the issue avoids one of the major themes in the book, and continues to hide an aspect of history which is too often hidden.

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Roger Howe in Perspective

We write in response to the thought-provoking article by Eileen Pollack, "Why Are There Still So Few Women in Science?", which appeared in *The New York Times* in October 2013. Pollack—one of the first women to earn a B.S. in physics at Yale—subsequently left science entirely and is now Professor of Creative Writing at Michigan. We are glad to see how Pollack's article has reinvigorated the public discussion of women in science.

At the same time we're concerned that the article paints a potentially misleading portrait of Roger Howe, Professor of Mathematics at Yale and supervisor of Pollack's undergraduate thesis. Pollack's article recounts that Howe neither praised that thesis nor encouraged her to pursue a Ph.D. Indeed, it was only years later that Pollack learned that he had considered her thesis work "exceptional". In view of Pollack's central theme—"The most powerful determinant of whether a woman goes on in science might be whether anyone encourages her to go on"—it's easy for readers to see Howe as a villain in Pollack's personal story.

But historical perspective is important here. When Pollack first met Howe in the 1970s, it was early in Howe's career—and very early in Yale's transition to undergraduate coeducation. Pollack's article leaps over the intervening thirty-five years of Howe's career, in which he has been celebrated not only for his research but also for his long-term involvement with K-12 education. He received the 2006 AMS Award for Distinguished Public Service.

Our own experiences with Howe contrast sharply with Pollack's. Howe played a positive role in our development as mathematicians, and made the Yale Mathematics Department a friendly and welcoming place when we earned our Ph.D.'s there in the 1980s and 1990s. Two of us (Nahmod and Wu) had mathematical interests quite different from Howe's, but we took several topics courses with him. When we were newly arrived from abroad, Roger invited us to celebrate Thanksgiving with his family. He made several such gestures that carried a deep and lasting message of inclusiveness and encouragement. One of us (Kim) was Howe's Ph.D. student and confidently asserts that she would not have had a mathematical career without him.

We've contacted several other mathematicians, male and female, who interacted with Howe at Yale early in their careers. Their experiences complement ours. For example,

Gail Ratcliff of East Carolina University, Howe's first female Ph.D. student, considers Howe "a good friend" thirty years later. Hadi Salmasian of the University of Ottawa, a male Ph.D. student of Howe, recalls that, while working on his dissertation, Howe explained to him with great excitement the works of two former Yale Ph.D. female students. Miriam Logan of Bowdoin College earned her Ph.D. with Howe after five years of meeting with him for "four-five days each week". If that's not dedication and encouragement, she says, "I do not know what is."

We hope that this note helps to provide a more complete portrait of Roger Howe, by describing the support he's provided to young scientists, especially women, over the course of his long and varied career.

A longer version of this note is at http://web.mit.edu/juleekim/www/Roger_Howe.pdf.

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Bibliometric Indices and Competition

Bibliometric indices are tools. I totally agree that they cannot establish or rank the quality of theorems. Still, they do indicate something, even if they do it roughly: citation indices indicate impact on the scientific community. As in many human problems, the danger lies in extreme attitudes: one is a blind use of the indices—completely disregarding a qualitative analysis—the other is their substantial neglect. The latter, for instance,

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is the policy recently followed in Italy by the committee for the habilitation to full professor in the Geometry and Algebra sector, in some cases, invoking documents by the European Mathematical Society and the International Mathematical Union. Everything is officially documented—in Italian—at <https://abilitazione.cineca.it/ministero.php/public/elencodomande/settore/01%252FA2/fascia/1>.

One outcome was that a mathematician I know well (XY say) was refused the habilitation. This failure looks paradoxical to me: on the one hand it is based on an “insufficient impact on the research of the area,” on the other, XY’s indices show the opposite. The H-index and the contemporary H-index—based on Scopus and ISI and supplied to the committee by the Ministry itself—place XY near the top of the list of candidates. The paradox is solved by the explicit admission that the committee, at least in this case, focused on MathSciNet. Beyond the fact that this choice still gives XY an H-index not lower than the ones of most of the candidates that obtained the habilitation, this approach raises some important questions. Can we disregard the impact of our research outside our own community? Wouldn’t such disregard be antithetical to a widespread trend towards interdisciplinarity well represented, e.g., in the National Research Council document http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=15269? I think that a sound scientific judgment should consider all citation data. As the IMU puts it, it is information which should not be hidden but illuminated (<http://www.mathunion.org/fileadmin/IMU/Report/CitationStatistics.pdf>, page 5). In my opinion, without a clear and consistent position about this issue, every statement of our community claiming the interdisciplinary role of mathematics runs a real risk of being perceived as unreliable or empty.

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