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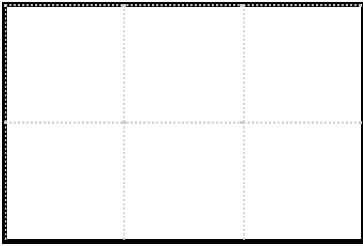
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# Richard Feynman, sexism and changing perceptions of a scientific icon

The text of this post has been removed because it did not meet Scientific American's quality standards.

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By Ashutosh Jogalekar on July 11, 2014



*[Note from Blogs Editor Curtis Brainard: On Saturday, July 12 the text of this post was replaced with the following statement: "The text of this post has been removed because it did not meet Scientific American's quality standards."]*

*To be specific, we felt that the post lacked clarity in a manner similar to two previous posts published by this author (please see, "[A Response to Recent Criticism](#)"). As the author acknowledged in an addendum to the post before it was removed, he did not effectively convey the points he was trying to make. We believe the lack of clarity made the post insensitive to valid concerns that many readers have about past and existing biases and prejudices in our society.*

*However, this alone is not necessarily enough to warrant removal. Another serious issue underlying the post was that following the earlier rounds of criticism of his work, the author and I had come to an agreement about steps that he would take to prevent future misunderstandings. The author, however, failed to take those steps when producing this post, which caused us to take down the post and remove the author from the blog network.*



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*Following a discussion among Scientific American's editors, we are now re-publishing the post in the interest of openness and transparency and because we believe that more will be learned from its presence than from its absence. This is in keeping with Scientific American's editorial philosophy that the best place for even the most disagreeable arguments and opinions is out in the open where they can be deconstructed and rebutted, if necessary, in public debate. We regret any confusion or frustration this episode has caused for our readers.]*

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Feynman playing the bongos (Image: richard-feynman.net)

I fell in love with Richard Feynman when I was in middle school. That is when I discovered "Surely you're joking Mr. Feynman" in my dad's bookshelf. For the first few hours I laughed till tears were rolling out of my eyes. This was not science, it was choice entertainment of the highest order. Whether he was fixing radios by "thinking", blowing up the physics lab at Princeton to test his thoughts on a water sprinkler experiment or cracking top-secret safes at Los Alamos for pure amusement, there was no one like Feynman. This perception was shared by almost all his colleagues and millions of Feynman fans around the world. I was hooked.



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My appreciation for Feynman's quirks continued with James Gleick's brilliant biography of him as well as the more comprehensive account by Jagdish Mehra. Gleick's biography is the most accessible and evocative; Mehra's is the most scientific and complete. I also read Feynman's more philosophical takes on everything from science to religion documented through books like "The Character of Physical Law" and "The Meaning of it All". The Feynman saga continued in college when, guided by a patient professor, a friend and I painstakingly studied chapters from "The Feynman Lectures on Physics". Again, the experience was like nothing else in science that we had experienced. This was not physics, it was the physics of life. The lectures are actually not that great as a textbook in my opinion since they are quite unconventional, but you would be hard pressed to find anything comparable that really exposes you to a gut feeling for the principles of physics and its relevance to the universe around us. And unlike other texts Feynman showed you the way using colloquial, no frills language and everyday examples; he was clearly one of the earliest popularizers of science in this regard.

By the time I got into graduate school I had thus read almost everything by or about this icon, save his technical work on quantum electrodynamics. And yet by that time cracks had begin to appear in the Feynman edifice. For one thing, I was starting to feel a little irritated by the "Feynman industry" that had sprung up about him, an industry that continued to churn out reprints of his books and CDs and DVDs of his lectures, not to mention an entire fleet of merchandise comprising Feynman t-shirts and mugs; Apple even featured him on their "Think Different" posters. That industry continues unabated, and while it has kept the Feynman legend alive, it has in fact transformed the physicist into more legend than a living and breathing man, full of human foibles and triumphs. Somewhere in the bongo playing, the safecracking and the nude sketching in topless bars is lost the real Feynman. It's an unfortunate development that has in part been engendered by Feynman himself, arising as it does from his own narration of his life as part comedy routine, part almost accidental Nobel Prize winning work.



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My first foray into taking a more critical view of Feynman came from his once arch-rival and contender for most brilliant theoretical physicist in the world, Murray Gell-Mann. Unlike many others Gell-Mann was never swayed by the Feynman legend, so he provides a good conduit through which to view the latter's personality. Although dismissing his status as some kind of a physics God, Gell-Mann genuinely admired Feynman's brilliance and originality - on this count there seems to be unanimous consensus - but his take on Feynman's personal quirks is more revealing. The main thing about Feynman that really got Gell-Mann's goat was that Feynman seemed to "spend a huge amount of time generating anecdotes about himself". Now that much would be clear to anyone who does even a perfunctory reading of "Surely You're Joking..." but Gell-Mann's opinion of Feynman seems to indicate a much more deliberate effort on Feynman's part to do this. Feynman often used to portray himself as some kind of working class city slicker thrown in the middle of distinguished, Sanskrit-quoting, tea-imbibing intellectuals at Princeton or Los Alamos, but the fact was that he relished being a contrarian among these people. A more careful reading of "Surely..." makes it clear that he got into thorny situations deliberately. One suspects that much of this was simply the result of boredom, but whatever the reason, it does give credence to

Gell-Mann's observation about him trying hard to generate stories about himself.

The deliberate generation of these stories could occasionally make Feynman appear like a jerk. A case in point concerns an anecdote when he kept the tip for a meal hidden beneath an inverted glass full of water. He wanted to illustrate to the waitress a clever way of sliding the glass over to the edge of the table, collecting the water without making it spill, and retrieving the tip. But of course he did not actually tell the waitress this; he wanted to simply play a prank so he left it to her to figure it out. The incident is actually trivial and those who would complain loudly about the poor woman having to mop up the water just to get her tip are exaggerating their case, but it does capture a central thread in the Feynman narrative, the physicist's often casual habit to inconvenience other people simply to prove a point, play a prank or conduct an experiment. He did this all his life, and a longer view of his life and career gives you the feeling that most of his colleagues put up with it not because they actually enjoyed it, but because they benefited from his brilliance too much to really bother about it.

What started bothering me more the deeper I dug into Feynman's life was something quite different: his casual sexism. The latest insight into this comes from Lawrence Krauss's book "Quantum Man" which does a great job explaining the one thing about Feynman that should matter the most - his science. But Krauss also does not ignore the warts. What startled me the most was the fact that when he was a young, boyish looking professor at Cornell, Feynman used to pretend to be a student so he could ask undergraduate women out. I suspect that this kind of behavior on the part of a contemporary professor would almost certainly lead to harsh disciplinary action, as it should. The behavior was clearly, egregiously wrong and when I read about it my view of Feynman definitely went down a notch, and a large notch at that. Feynman's apparent sexism was also the subject of a 2009 post with a sensationalist title; the post pointed out one chapter in "Surely..." in which Feynman documented various strategies he adopted for trying to get women in bars to sleep with him. Neither were Feynman's escapades limited to bars; more than one of his biographies have documented affairs

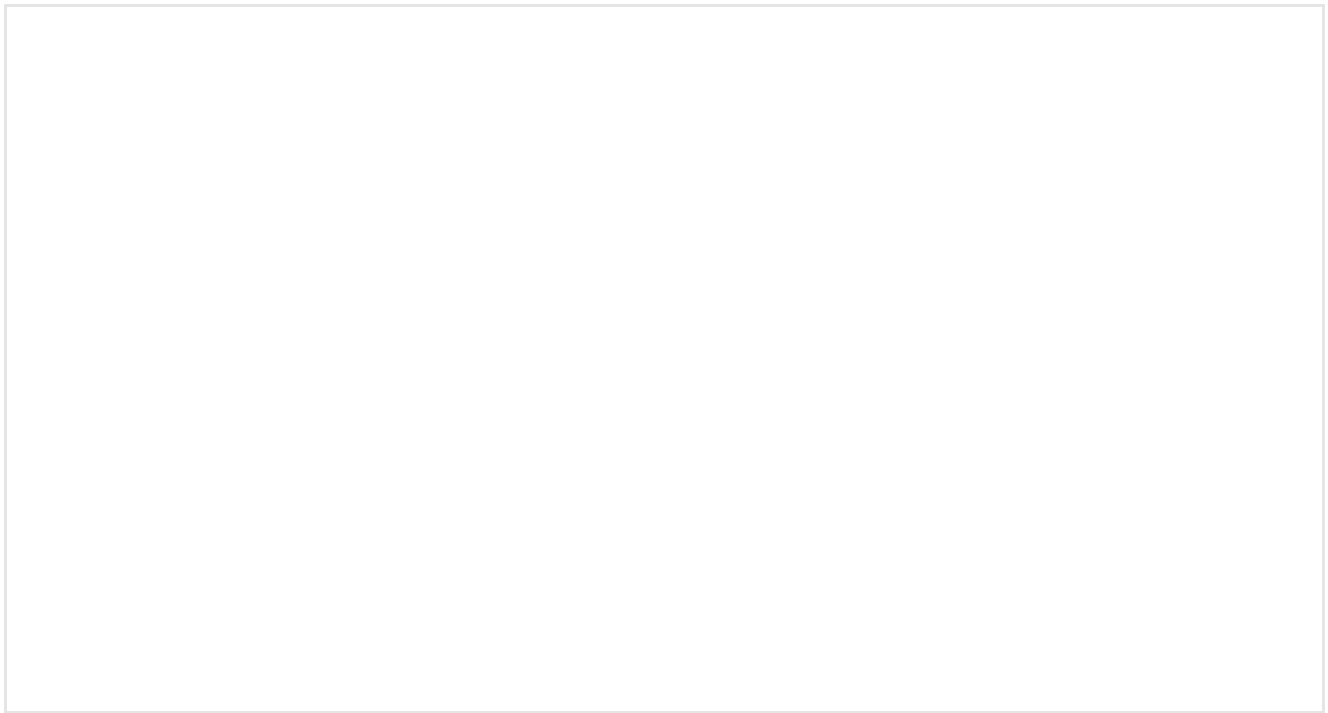
with two married women, at least one of which caused him considerable problems.

It's not surprising to find these anecdotes disturbing and even offensive, but I believe it would also be premature and simplistic to write off Richard Feynman as "sexist" across the board. People who want to accuse him of this seem to have inadvertently cherry-picked anecdotes; the nude painting in topless bars, the portrayal of a woman in a physics lesson as a clueless airhead, the propensity to lie on the beach and watch girls. But this view of Feynman misses the big picture. While not an excuse, several of his 1950s adventures were probably related to the deep pain and insecurity caused by the death of his first wife Arlene; by almost any account the two shared a very deep and special bond. It was also during the late 40s and early 50s that Feynman was doing some of his most intense work on quantum electrodynamics, and at least a few of the situations he narrates were part of him letting off steam.

Also importantly, while some of Feynman's utterances and actions appear sexist to modern sensibilities, it's worth noting that they were probably no different than the attitudes of a male-dominated American society in the giddy postwar years, a society in which women were supposed to take care of the house and children and men were seen as the bread winners. Thus, any side of Feynman that raises our eyebrows is really an aspect of a biased American society. In addition, Feynman's ploys to pick up girls in bars were - and in fact are - probably practiced by every American male seeking companionship in bars, whether consciously or unconsciously; what made Feynman different was the fact that he actually documented his methods, and he was probably the only *scientist* to do so. In fact we can be thankful that society has now progressed to a stage where both genders can practice these mate-seeking strategies on almost equal terms, although the gap indicated by that "almost" deserves contemplation as an indication of the unequal bargaining power that women still have. The point though is that, whatever his actions appear like to a modern crowd, I do not think Richard Feynman was any *more* sexist than a typical male product of his times and culture. The fact that society in general behaved similarly to what he did of course does not excuse



the things he did, but it also puts them in perspective. I think recognizing this perspective is important partly to understand how our views on sexism have changed for the better from 1950 to 2014. The encouraging development is that actions by Feynman - and male society in general - that were considered acceptable or amusing in 1950 would quite rightly cause instant outrage in 2014. We still have a long way to go before both genders achieve parity in science, but the change in attitudes is definitely encouraging.



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However the fact that simply dismissing Feynman as sexist is problematic is ascertained by this [1999 article](#) from the MIT Tech (by a woman) which gives us a more complete picture of his views toward women. As far as we know, there is no evidence that Feynman discriminated against women in his career; the letters he writes to women in the [collection](#) of letters edited by his daughter indicate no bias. Both male and female students admired him. His sister Joan documents how he was always supportive of her own career in physics. At one point he came to the aid of a female professor filing a discrimination suit at Caltech. In addition he was a devoted husband

to his first and third wife and a loving and supportive father to his daughter who in fact tried hard to get her interested in science.

The irony thus seems to be that, just like Feynman was fond of generating cherry picked anecdotes about himself, we seem to be fond of generating skewed, cherry picked anecdotes about him that accuse him of sexism. In fact most conversations about Feynman seem to center on a few select anecdotes that showcase some side of his character, whether positive or negative, and this anecdotal reading of his life is something he himself encouraged. But a more complete view of Feynman's life and career indicates otherwise. My own perceptions of Feynman have changed, and that's the way it should be. At first I idolized Feynman like many others, but over time, as a more careful reading of his life revealed some of the unseemlier sides of his character, I became aware of his flaws. While I still love his lectures and science, these flaws have affected my perception of his personality, and I am glad they did. There are things that he said or did that are clearly wrong or questionable at the very least, but we can at least be grateful that we have evolved to a stage where even the few instances of his behavior that have been documented would not be tolerated on today's college campuses and would be instantly condemned. As a man I do not now admire Feynman as much as I did before, but I am also glad to have a more complete understanding of his life and times.

However I think it's also important that we don't make the same mistake that the "Feynman industry" has made - focus on a part of the celebrated physicist's life and ignore many others. Feynman was a brilliant physicist, Feynman was occasionally sexist - and sometimes disturbingly so- and Feynman also supported women in science. One reason why it's interesting to explore these contradictory sides of Feynman's personality is because he is not a scientist who is usually regarded as complicated and contradictory, but the facts indicate that he was. Feynman himself did a kind of disservice by sending a few wrong messages through the recounting of his adventures, and others have performed an equal disservice by embellishing his achievements and

papering over his ugly side. But knowing his emphasis on honesty and integrity in science - one ethic that does consistently shine forth from the narrative of his life - he would almost certainly want us to do better. We can condemn parts of his behavior while praising his science. And we should.

*Note: There were some things in the piece that did not seem to have come across as clearly as I meant them to; I apologize if this was the case. Firstly, when comparing Feynman's behavior with other men I was not excusing it, I was saying that his behavior was a sad commentary on society as a whole, so he was not special; \*most\* men during those times were to blame for similar actions. Secondly, this post was about how Feynman's image in my mind went down a notch with these revelations and I started to admire him less as a man. Thirdly, I wanted to point out some of the good things that he did for women in science and the fact that he did not professionally discriminate against them; the reason for doing this was to indicate that Feynman - a man who is usually not considered contradictory or complicated - was actually these things.*

*The views expressed are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily those of Scientific American.*

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Ashutosh Jogalekar is a chemist interested in the history, philosophy and sociology of science. He is fascinated by the logic of scientific discovery and by the interaction of science with public sentiments and policy. He blogs at The Curious Wavefunction and can be reached at [curiouswavefunction@gmail.com](mailto:curiouswavefunction@gmail.com).

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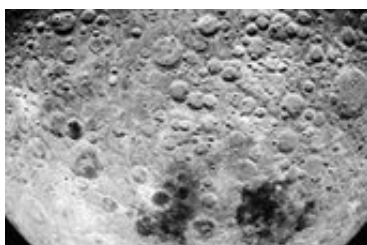
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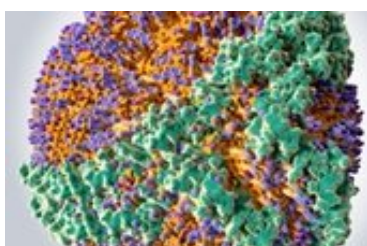
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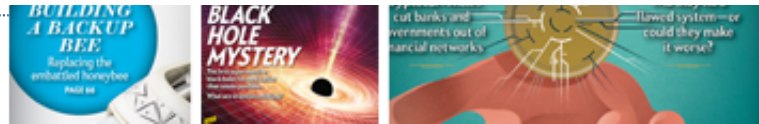
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