

Statement Regarding ABMR's Early Years and the Inclusion of Women

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The founding ABMR document from the 1978 Institute of Medicine (IOM) Conference describes a meeting convened to form an organization devoted to what was described as the emerging field of behavioral medicine. The meeting was attended by 35 prominent behavioral and biomedical scholars, all of whom were white men.¹ The document is bold in its vision and has guided ABMR for years to the benefit of its members and the field. Forty-two years later, in 2020, one wonders why women did not have a larger voice in the beginning of ABMR.

Dr. Stephen M. Weiss, who later served as ABMR President in 1986-87, helped organize the IOM Conference, which followed an earlier Yale Conference that defined behavioral medicine.² Reflecting on the selection of attendees to the IOM Conference, he explained that the focus was on diversity. However, it was on the disciplines represented by scholars with behavioral science knowledge and expertise in the range of basic and clinical sciences relevant to the new field.

To understand the absence of women at the 1978 IOM Conference, it is important to consider that those invited to the conference all held doctorate degrees and were considered leaders in their discipline. Even those who were relatively new to the field would have received their doctorates at least a decade earlier. In 1966, of the doctoral degrees awarded in science and engineering, or in medicine, only eight percent were awarded to women. The low percentage of women reflects much about the socio-cultural environment at the time but it, unfortunately, also reflected discrimination against women for admission to graduate schools. It would be another five years before Title IX made such discrimination illegal. The effect of Title IX was immediately seen as the percentage of doctorates awarded to women in science and medicine rose steadily to above 45 percent today.

For the women invited to attend and join ABMR meetings, or to participate in behavioral medicine conferences in the earliest years, they were sometimes one of few if not the only woman in the room. Talking with colleagues who shared this experience, the overwhelming response was that women were welcomed as fellow scholars. Indeed, it was with the more senior men, often the "founding" members of ABMR, where women gained informal mentoring, including from many of those who held the office of president and other leadership positions. ABMR, unlike most professional meetings with tight schedules, offered fluid opportunities to exchange ideas not only regarding science, but professionalism and career development.

It was evident from the founding document that the plan was for ABMR to include women. Throughout the document, the references to activities involving members refer to "his/her," and the list of 128 Potential Candidates for Academy Membership generated by the Membership Working Group at the IOM Conference included 6 women. Indeed, as the percentage of women earning doctorates has increased over the years following Title IX, the proportion of ABMR members has increased to 38%. While it was 20 years before a woman served as President of ABMR, in the last 22 years more than a third of the presidents have been women.

Given the increased awareness about the social injustice in our world today, this is a time for reflection and new action. It is evident that the social and behavioral factors we study often determine the life course and health trajectory of individuals and groups. As AMBR moves into a new decade, more

attention should be placed on further increasing the diversity of our membership beyond gender, and on translating our research into public policy.

¹The two co-chairs of the convening, Drs. Neal Miller and David Hamburg, would come to serve as the first two presidents of the new organization, for the 1978 and 1979 terms.

²Schwartz GE, Weiss SM. The Yale conference on behavioral medicine: A proposed definition and statement of goals. *J Behav Med*, 1978;1:3-12. Thirty-two scientists, including 3 women were invited to attend this conference. Among those who actually attended, 20 were men, and 2 were women, Drs. Judith Rodin (Yale) and Miriam Keltz (NIH).