

Martha Olney

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Martha Olney was born in Oakland, CA and grew up in the Bay Area. She very much stumbled into studying economics. It was 1975, the beginning of her sophomore year at the University of Redlands. Class registration was in the sweltering hot gym, with tables lined up around the edges in alphabetical order. The English department did not have the class Olney needed, and so another option was needed.

I backed into the middle of the room. [The tables were] English, then Engineering, and then Economics. I didn't want to take engineering. There was no line at the economics table. So I went to the economics table and because it was 106 degrees, I was inside a gym, it was hotter than spit, and there was no air conditioning, I said "Do you have anything that's a Tuesday/Thursday morning class?" They had something called Intro to Micro. I said "Good, I'll take it" and signed up. That's it. That's how well thought out this was. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 1.)

Back then, economics was not taught in high school, so Olney had almost no knowledge of the subject. However, she quickly fell in love with how economics married her interest in math with issues that touched on real people's lives. She ultimately double majored in math and economics.

During Olney's high school years, she was co-president of her school's women's liberation organization, Women on the Move. Coming from a progressive high school, it was tough for Olney to be in a more traditional and somewhat conservative college.

I went from this environment where I was voted most feminist in my high school ... to a college that was about 15 years behind in terms of social issues. That was very challenging. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 4.)

After graduating from Redlands in 1978, Olney immediately started grad school at Berkeley. She wasn't yet convinced that she wanted to be a professor. As a young girl, Olney had been socialized into thinking she had three career options: nurse, secretary, or teacher. She didn't want to be a nurse because she did not like needles and blood; she decided against being a secretary because her peers told her she was too smart; and lastly she didn't want to be a teacher because she resented being told she only had three options. However, once Olney got her first role as a GSI in Fall 1979 her perspective changed,

But then I started teaching. And God, I liked it, and I was good at it. It made me feel fulfilled, and I made a difference in people's lives. I could explain things in a way that helped people to understand them. I could see the light bulb go on and it was just, it was fabulous. I got a number of different teaching experiences, and every one of them was a pretty positive experience. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 6.)

Olney taught at the College of San Mateo, a community college, while in her last two years at Berkeley. Upon finishing graduate school, she got her first job in 1984 at UMass Amherst, at which she later received tenure. In 1990—shortly before her tenure decision—her wife, Rev. Esther Hargis, got a job as the pastor at First Baptist Church of Berkeley and moved back to California. Although Olney managed to work it out by going back and forth for 5 long years, she finally resigned from UMass and relocated permanently to Berkeley to be with her wife. Her appointment at Berkeley was first as a Visiting Professor, then an Adjunct Professor, and finally in 2017 as a Teaching Professor of Economics.

In comparison with today's demographics of the students who study economics, Olney recalls that the student body when she first started teaching was quite different. A rapid surge of immigrants after the Immigration Act of 1965 played a key role in explaining gradual changes in the student body over the years, Olney remarked.

[T]he Immigration Act of 1965 is what begins the tremendous change in the demographic of the country. ...The classroom in 1979 was more ... like a 1950s kind of classroom in the sense of [being] mostly white. Not very international. Probably a lot of first-gen students because in 1979 you're still getting a lot of people from families where [the parents had not attended college]. ...Then, just sort of gradually over time you see ... the student body changing in reflection of the [1965] immigration law. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 9.)

Both from her years as a graduate student at Berkeley and the last 30 years on the faculty, Olney recalls some unfavorable memories of being treated differently due to her gender. In seminars, for example, questions from women are either ignored or given a quick perfunctory answer, while the exact same question is called a “good question” when raised by a man.

In a way, you just kind of get used to it, and then you stop seeing it. One of the things that I appreciate about the economic history seminar, which is the one I most often attend, is that Barry Eichengreen in particular is really good about calling it out. ... I really appreciate that he calls it out. And I think that's important. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 10.)

Having earned her stripes as a women's libber in her teenage years and having been a strong feminist her whole life, she talks about how she feels about the MeToo movement that was founded in 2016. Olney notes that for some women, the MeToo movement opened their eyes to these sorts of gender dynamics.

I'm grateful that there are other people who see it now. I'm sorry it took the MeToo movement for them to see it. ... What [the MeToo movement] did was remind me of the stuff I've always seen. We are still dealing with the same stuff that we dealt with when I was in Women on the Move in high school. ... Almost 45 years later, we're still dealing with the same bullshit. ... “Consciousness raising” is what we called it at the time. Now there are new terms for it, but it's the same battles we were fighting in the 70s. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 11.)

A major strain for women in academia is that the tenure clock and the biological clock tend to overlap. Olney was not an exception; she postponed family planning while on the tenure track at UMass. By the time she tried conceiving, early menopause made it impossible. In 1999, Olney adopted her son. Because her appointment at the time was as a Visiting Professor, combining work and family was extra challenging for Olney compared to the other professor moms.

Well, first of all, I didn't have any maternity leave. So, that was a problem. ... I went [to Russia to bring] him home. ... I left on the first Saturday morning of spring break, and I got back home the next Saturday. I was teaching Econ 1. I had the head GSI teach for me on Monday, and I was back in the classroom on Wednesday. So, I took a day. So that was crazy. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 13.)

A consistent theme in her teaching is the role of assumptions in any economic argument. A willingness to challenge assumptions, Olney believes, can be attributed to “nonstandard” lived experiences, including those of women, people of color, and first-generation students. When she first started doing work on 1920s and 1930s debt-financed purchases of consumer durables, Olney recalls being confronted with the classic economics argument of “that’s not rational.”

I feel like the willingness to let the data tell me how people behave instead of insisting that the theory tell me how people behave is, not entirely, but is somewhat gendered. ... [People would ask,] “Why would somebody borrow at an effective interest rate of 35% when they could just save up the money over the same period of time, and then they would be able to buy the good for cash?” ... I've got the data, they did it. ... I think that we have gone down so many bad paths by not being willing to challenge assumptions. And we don't challenge the assumptions because we don't have enough diversity of lived experience in the room. (Olney, interview with the authors, pp. 15 and 19.)

Olney says that her perspective in economics comes from her own lived experience as a woman and a queer person with long-standing, humble familial ties to Oakland. Her maternal grandmother worked as a maid at Berkeley’s Durant Hotel (now renamed the Graduate Berkeley hotel), and her paternal grandmother was a caterer in nearby Piedmont.

Both of my parents were raised by single moms in Oakland. ... We weren't from money at all. ... We were the families that service the people who had the money. ... My grandma made up the beds for the people, and my other grandma served the food. That perspective has always influenced what I think about when I think about families and borrowing and debt. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 16.)

As a member of the LGBTQ community, Olney says there’s no reason to hold on to the assumption that every couple is a male-female couple.

What if you think about same-sex couples? How does your analysis work then? ... Even in same-sex couples, there's specialization and trade. ... We're getting the kitchen remodeled ... and we were talking to the contractor on Friday, and we were talking about "my" stove and "Esther's" sink because I cook and she cleans. ... Couples specialize and trade and that's independent of gender. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 17.)

When asked about how women can support each other in economics and what men can do, Olney says that people have to stand up for one another. Furthermore, Olney states that it's important to validate people's experiences and identity.

I get very frustrated when others will say, "I wouldn't want to suggest such-and-such a program that's for black women because then the student will know that I see them as a black woman." We know they're a black woman. She knows she's a black woman. It's not like it's a secret. ... I feel like that's white privilege and racism. ... The same is true for gender. I think that pretending you don't see gender is a statement of privilege and not a statement of fact. (Olney, interview with the authors, pp. 17 and 18.)

Olney also says that faculty need to be transparent with their students and mentees about what their lives are like. She strives to be honest about her lived experiences with her students and tries to use her network to introduce people to resources that could help them progress on their paths.

[M]any graduate students say, "Oh, I have imposter syndrome," and they think no faculty do. Are you kidding? We all have it. I think being willing to be honest and share those kinds of struggles [is] really important. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 18.)

This is Professor Olney's advice for female undergraduates currently studying economics:

Believe in yourself. Don't let people push you off your path. You can do this. Find your community, or create your community if you can't find it. And find or create a community of people who support you and support you becoming whoever it is you're going to become. When you run into an asshole, know that it's them and not you. (Olney, interview with the authors, p. 19.)

Olney taught her final undergraduate class in Spring 2021, completing over 40 years of bringing students into her life and inspiring them along the way.

Work Cited

Olney, Martha. Interview with the authors. El Cerrito, CA. 22 February 2021. Archived at https://www.econ.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/Olney%20Interview%20Transcript%20Feb%2022%202021_0.pdf.