

The Lack of Women in Philosophy: Psychological and Structural Barriers and the Moral Dimension of Epistemic Responsibility

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1. Introduction

In the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the field of philosophy employs fewer women in fulltime tenured posts than any other humanities field in academia [Beebe and Saul 2011, Goddard 2008, Norlock 2006]. The gender inequity in the field of philosophy is well known, and many have speculated that it is due to the masculinist, aggressive style of argumentation for which philosophy is known. Due to enculturated gendered traits of cooperation and conciliation, women may find this style of argumentation foreign and unappealing. Given that many more women begin as philosophy students than those that finish as permanent full time faculty, this speculation may indeed identify one of the barriers that have kept women out of philosophy. However, there are perhaps more pervasive and inimical barriers to women. One such barrier may be implicit bias. Research on racist attitudes and behavior has shown that implicit or nonconscious biases against African Americans negatively affect behavior toward them. This is true even for individuals who score low on measurements of explicit racial biases. Moreover, those who think of themselves as objectively egalitarian are often most blind to their own racist behavior. Another barrier that may be operative is stereotype threat, which causes those associated with negative stereotypes to underperform. The nature of this paper is both descriptive and normative. First I will identify the evidence for implicit bias and stereotype threat relevant to gender inequity within philosophy. Then I will argue that there is a strong moral imperative to 1) become epistemically responsible for the ways in which these biases and stereotypes are perpetuated; and, 2) enact counter measures at the institutional and individual levels.

2. An Overview of the Problem

Despite many initiatives to increase gender diversity within the profession of philosophy, it remains a field dominated by men. In fact, the underrepresentation of women in philosophy is greater than in any other humanities field. Worldwide, over 80% of professional full time philosophers are male. In the interest of time and space, I will focus on U.S. In the United States, only 16.6% of full time philosophy instructors are women. Overall in the U.S., 21% of employed post secondary philosophy instructors are women, with 26% of part time instructors being women [Norlock 2006]. Compare this to the humanities overall, wherein 41% of all instructors are women. At the top 20 universities, women comprise 19% of tenured philosophy faculty and 21% of full time faculty [Haslanger 2011]. One interesting set of data looked at an authoritative and popular ranking of philosophy programs [Van Camp 2010]. The results showed an inverse relationship between high rank of program and number of female faculty, with the top ranking programs employing the fewest number of women faculty. The five programs with the greatest number of female faculty did not meet the minimum criteria for ranking, and did not make the evaluator's list. It should not be surprising to anyone that over 90% of the evaluators doing the rankings of the philosophy programs were male.

If we look to other areas of professional responsibility such as publication rates in journals, we find a similar scenario. Women are underrepresented in many of the top peer reviewed journals. MIT Philosopher, Sally Haslanger, reviewed some of the most respected philosophical journals including *Ethics*, *Journal of Philosophy*, *Mind*, *Nous*, *Philosophical Review*, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, and *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Haslanger found that over a recent 5 year period only 2.36% of the articles and discussions published in these journals were authored by women [Haslanger 2008]. In addition, Haslanger found that only 17% of women occupied positions of associate and advisory editor for these journals.

A recent study of PhDs awarded in the U.S. showed that women received fewer PhDs in philosophy than in any other humanities field. In fact, the only fields granting fewer PhDs to women than philosophy were computer science, engineering, and physics [Healy 2011]. Perhaps even more troubling is the fact the number of philosophy PhDs granted to women has changed little over the past 15-20 years. The average percentage of philosophy doctorate degrees granted to women over this time period has remained approximately 27%, showing on average no gains in the numbers over the years. Even in fields currently granting women fewer PhDs than philosophy, such as engineering, there have been increases in those numbers over the last 20 years. According to philosopher Linda Alcoff, “[t]his indicates that we have been stuck for perhaps three decades at a plateau of roughly one quarter of the profession, mysteriously unable to make significant gains beyond this” [Alcoff 2011].

A recent analysis of data on females in philosophy from introductory courses through to the level of majors shows that there is a precipitous drop in the numbers of women enrolled in introductory courses to the number of those who become philosophy majors [Haslanger 2008]. Although more data needs to be gathered, it appears that women enroll in lower level philosophy courses at approximately the same rate as men [Calhoun 2009], but less than a third of philosophy majors are women [Brister 2007]. This phenomenon has been referred to as the leaky pipeline. What exactly is happening, however, to cause the drop in numbers of women taking introductory courses to those higher on the rungs of the philosophical academic ladder requires further analysis. Is it that philosophy is just too difficult for women to master? Perhaps the toy company Mattel should introduce a Barbie Doll that says “philosophy class is tough,” rather than reviving the older Barbie doll that said “math class is tough.” Or perhaps Mattel should begin working on a Barbie doll that would say “philosophy class is sexist.” To be fair, the profession has taken a stance on remedying sexism. However, the possibility of sexist bias remains, even though many in the field would consciously and explicitly disavow sexist attitudes and behavior. Rather than assuming that women simply aren’t capable of mastering philosophy, perhaps we should look for alternative explanations for the gender disparity within the field. It is some of these alternate explanations that I will now address.

3. Explanations?

Unconscious Biases

One of the more pernicious and intransigent mechanisms of sexist attitudes and behaviors might be the influence of unconscious dispositions regarding gender. There is a great deal of research literature showing that unconscious influences regarding race are widespread, even among those of us who are committed to egalitarian views and behavior. Tamar Gendler’s research focuses on the ways in which cognitive categorization helps us navigate a world of complex information. In a world of highly detailed, complex information, categorizing

objects of which we have limited experience, and with which we have limited cognitive capacities to deal, allows us to make sense of our world. The cognitive schemas that we use, however, are necessarily limited by our relatively limited experience of the world [Gendler 2008]. They are also limiting in that their goal is to simplify complex data so that our experience of the world is manageable. Because of this, Gendler notes that there is a tendency towards intracategory assimilation which emphasizes the similarity between individuals within a category, and intercategory contrast which emphasizes the differences among individuals between categories. Assisting in this simplification process are stereotypes, which are ever present in information processing. Stereotype confirming information is more likely to be encoded while stereotype disconfirming information is more likely to be ignored. Moreover, Gendler finds that our expectations and associations become automated, which further distances these stereotyping influences from our conscious and critically evaluative reach.

This automation of our expectations, associations, and confirmations about the world is characteristic of what Gendler calls an *alief*. “An alief is, to a reasonable approximation, an innate or habitual propensity to respond to an apparent stimulus in a particular way. It is to be in a mental state that is...associative, automatic and arational...[aliefs] are developmentally and conceptually antecedent to other cognitive attitudes that [we] may go on to develop. Typically, they are also affect-laden and action-generating” [Gendler 2008, 552]. Gendler’s research shows that individuals respond to the world through the selective uptake of category and stereotype confirming information that our aliefs dispose us toward, and that this process has representational, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The upshot of this research is that our arational aliefs motivate us toward adopting other beliefs and behaviors.

What is important to note, however, is that aliefs are motivational even in the presence of rational beliefs that do not concord with the alief. For example, one may explicitly deny that women are less capable at math than men, but unconsciously devalue a female applicant’s mathematical qualifications. In fact, those who consider themselves to be the most egalitarian may be the least likely to objectively recognize their own sexist dispositions [Uhlmann and Cohen 2007].

Aliefs motivate those in the target group as well. For example, given the ubiquity of the association of women with mathematical incompetence (let us not forget Barbie), many women may suffer from stereotypical processing of information about themselves. Gendler illustrates this with the following example: it would be very likely that a female student would have “an alief with the content ‘Female applies to me, and female is associated with poor math performance;’” affectively, anxiety would beset the woman and she may (anxiously) and repetitively double check her answers to be sure she is doing them correctly [Gendler 2011, 51]. Gendler points out that the woman rationally believes that she is good at math, she has ample evidence to support this belief, and yet unreflectively she is influenced by the alief. Even perhaps to the extent that the alief induced anxiety may lead her to underperform on the math problems.

A complete description and evaluation of Gendler’s alief model is beyond the scope of this paper. However, even if we grant that Gendler’s model may carry less explanatory weight with regard to unconscious influences and schemas that are attached to racial and gender categories than competing theories, *that* those influences and schemas are attached to racial and gender categories, and that they affect our attitudes and behavior in ways that we would reflectively find objectionable, seems beyond dispute. The research shows that schemas associated with race and gender are widely shared, and that we perceive and treat individuals

based on these schemas. Both males and females partake of these types of unconscious schemas and influences. And, as Gendler points out, none of us escape the oppressive social arrangements and meanings that structure the world in which we live, despite our strenuous disavowals of them. Gendler writes, “[e]ven among those who are explicitly and sincerely committed to anti-racism, the legacy of having lived in a society structured by hierarchical and hostile racial divisions retains its imprint” [Gendler 2011, 44]. Some of the research examples she cites include whites primed with images of black faces are more likely to misidentify items as guns, and they are quicker at shooting black targets than white targets when playing video games; identical resumes but for the names will receive fewer call backs if they bear stereotypically black sounding names; and individuals with stereotypically sounding black names are more likely to have their requests for assistance with voter registration ignored by their state legislators.

The claim that “the legacy of having lived in a society structured by hierarchical and hostile racial divisions retains its imprint” on even the most egalitarian of us could just as easily be made about sexist hierarchical structures and meaning. Research shows that both men and women are more likely to vote to hire a male candidate than a female candidate with an identical record; and both men and women are more likely to favor the research, teaching, and service experience of a male candidate to a female candidate with an identical record [Steinpreis et. al. 1999]. Moreover, female candidates were four times more likely to receive cautionary statements such as “I would like to see evidence that she got these grants on her own,” than were male candidates. One study showed that women had to be 2.5 times *more* productive than men to receive the same score by evaluators [Wenneras and Wold 1997]. In an analysis of peer reviewed research, Harvard Professor Michele Lamont [2009] and her colleagues found that in general men’s traits are viewed as more valuable than women’s and that men are judged diffusely as more competent. Not surprisingly, the review also shows that women academics are perceived as less productive and less capable of succeeding in full-time, tenure-track positions; and that this results in women’s performances being subject to heightened scrutiny and higher standards than their male colleagues [Lamont, et. al. 2009]. This concurs with research showing that on average within academia women are less likely to be promoted, and are more likely to earn less than their male colleagues of the same rank. This economic disparity is greatest at the rank of full professor. Like the previously cited literature, this research showed that the disparity is not due to women being less productive than men, but to men’s contributions receiving greater reward for their work with each year of experience. Women may be judged adequate or competent (she’s OK), but the standards for being judged excellent are much higher for women than for men (she’s OK, but she’s not that good).

These statistics are sobering. If we heed Gendler’s caution that for all of us, our psychological schema bears the imprint of living with discriminatory hierarchical social structures and meanings, then we cannot ignore their pernicious effects. Our psychological schema leads to nonconscious influences on judgments and behaviors associated with categories of gender that disadvantage women. More broadly, the schema for ‘man’ concurs with traits of success such as rational, competent, and assertive; while the schema for ‘woman’ tends to concord with traits such as emotional, less competent, and passive. With regard to philosophy, Haslanger has noted that the schema for “philosopher” is incongruent with the stereotypical schema for ‘woman’ [Haslanger 2008]. Philosophy has long been characterized as a masculine field that is known for its harsh and rational argumentative approach, its privileging of logical reasoning over emotion and the mind over the body; and its impenetrable texts. It deals with abstract concepts, and is often viewed as being too impractical and too impenetrable for many of us. One harkens back to the time

when philosophy was known as the “Queen of Sciences,” the study of which was reserved for the most erudite.

If women generally face stereotypes linking them to professional incompetence, then they face even more challenging stereotypes linking them to professional philosophical incompetence. The conflict between the schema for ‘philosopher’ and the schema for ‘woman’ may help explain some of the gender disparity within the discipline. The conflicting schemas may lead to two types of nonconscious bias against women. The first is implicit bias, and the second is stereotype threat. Implicit bias affects the ways in which we judge and evaluate others, and influences our behavioral responses to others of the target group, which in this case is women. The research on the existence of implicit bias is well supported [Jost et. al. 2009]. Both men and women are biased against women with regard to competence and positions of authority, while associating women with the domestic domain of family and children. A 2010 study of law school students revealed that gender implicit bias is pervasive [Levinson and Young 2010], and that this bias did predict discriminatory decisions against women and their competencies for authoritative legal and judicial leadership. Women are expected to be less competent than men, and when women display characteristics associated with masculine success, such as assertiveness, women are judged negatively as “bitchy” or unfeminine.

Given the masculine schemas associated with philosophy, it is likely that those in positions of power such as teachers or hiring committee members would view women more negatively than men. For example, female students may be preemptively perceived as being less capable of making valuable contributions in class, which may lead to instructors calling on them less often than male students. Professors may unconsciously favor male students, or offer extra support and encouragement to them while offering less to female students. The work of female students may be evaluated more harshly, which may be reflected in the grades assigned. And, it is very likely that a syllabus for a philosophy class that is not specific toward women or feminist theory will almost exclusively include male authors.

Of course, all of these detrimental factors are likely to persist beyond the classroom, through the hiring process, and into the department. Female colleagues may face more negative evaluations, harsher standards of excellence, isolation, lack of mentoring, be assigned more service work, and receive fewer favorable tenure and promotion awards. Outside of their department, they may have a more difficult time having papers published. As Haslanger noted, when journal editors use anonymous review they publish more articles by women. However, many of the top philosophical journals do not have completely anonymous review processes, and only 2.6% of the articles in those journals analyzed by Haslanger were authored by women.

In addition to suffering the consequences of implicit bias which leads individuals to negatively evaluate and interact with women, women in all levels of philosophy are also subject to the harmful effects of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is a “phenomenon whereby activating an individual’s thought about her membership in a group that is associated with impaired performance in a particular domain increases her tendency to perform in a stereotype confirming manner” [Gendler 2011, 60]. Stereotype threat differs from implicit bias in that the member of the target group actually performs less well due to the affective, arational, and nonreflective dimensions of associating oneself as a “woman” with the negative stereotypes attached to “woman”. For example, when Asian American girls grades kindergarten to eighth grade were asked to perform tasks that emphasized their female identity they subsequently performed poorly on a standardized math test. However, when

Asian American girls were asked to perform tasks that emphasized their Asian identity and not their female identity, they scored significantly higher [Ambady et. al. 2001]. A Similar study showed that when Asian American female undergraduates were given surveys that emphasized their Asian identity they performed best on a subsequent math test. When they were given a survey that emphasized their female identity they performed worst, scoring even lower than the control group who received no pretest survey [Shih and Trahan 2006].

Contextual elements that trigger stereotype threat are prevalent. For example, research shows that surprisingly little needs to be done to trigger one's association with stereotypes. Just the unconscious fear of being judged as confirming the stereotype, or the absence of images confirming success at the task can be sufficient triggers.

This may make the discipline of philosophy particularly difficult for women. Not only must a woman in philosophy counter social stereotypes, but she must also battle against the philosophical cannon itself. When we look to the philosophical cannon, we see at least two things relevant to stereotype threat. The first is an absence of women philosophers and the second is an explicit denigration of women in philosophical texts. Claims such as Aristotle's that women were deformed men, and Kant's that women lacked sufficient reason to engage in moral deliberation would likely trigger negative stereotypes in women in philosophy classes or departments. One can't help but wonder how the explicit association of women with irrationality that riddles the philosophic cannon affects the analytic performance of women in philosophy.

Ethical and Epistemological Implications: A Few Remarks

In 2005, Harvard University President Lawrence Summers made his controversial remarks about the absence of women in top science positions [Bombiarty, 2005]. This absence was most likely due, according to Summers, not to sexist bias, but to the facts that 1) women are less willing work as long and hard as men, and 2) women have less aptitude than men to succeed in these top positions. At this point, one might wonder how he could have made these remarks. Hadn't he read any of the copius research on implicit bias and stereotype threat? After all, only a small portion of that research has been cited in this paper. Now, I'm sure that Summers does not consider himself sexist, but I would like to suggest that the beliefs behind his remarks may help Summers to maintain an ignorance about both the reality of sexism, the vast literature on sexism, and his own sexist dispositions. In other words, Summers' remarks evince an epistemology of ignorance that further maintains a sexist epistemology. Charles Mills first introduced the idea of the epistemology of ignorance in his book *The Racial Contract* [Mills 1999]. Mills argued that white privilege requires the active maintenance of ignorance about nonwhites, and that because of this actively maintained ignorance, false beliefs about nonwhites serve as knowledge. Philosopher Nancy Tuana [2006] has also argued that ignorance is actively constructed and sustained.

The failure to acknowledge the likelihood of implicit bias and stereotype threat, and its likely effect on women in philosophy is both epistemically and ethically irresponsible. Tuana refers to this type of failure as willful ignorance [Tuana 2006]. This is ignorance on the part of the privileged about the oppressive conditions experienced by those not in positions of power, and ignorance of one's own role in perpetuating the oppression of others. Summers' remarks are indicative of both types of ignorance. The failure to acknowledge sexist bias makes it easier to perpetuate it, and easier to accept erroneous but stereotype confirming beliefs as knowledge. I would like to clarify that I do not believe that Summers is alone in his maintenance of ignorance. I suggest that most of us are ignorant in the same way to lesser

or greater degrees, and that we may not be very good judges of our own impairments. Given the detrimental effects of this ignorance/knowledge, both individuals and institutions should be compelled take much greater steps in gaining awareness of and reducing implicit bias and stereotype threat in the discipline of philosophy and the world beyond.

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