

Experts in Failure II: explaining underrepresentation in philosophy

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Abstract. In this paper, I respond to a list of explanations for why female students leave philosophy, or why a number of them leave English-speaking philosophy departments, which can also be adapted for various other underrepresented groups. I distinguish between an explanation according to which departures are because of poor talent management skills and another explanation, which I call the experts in failure explanation.

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“I have not seen her

In books by Pnina,

I don't think she's a Pakistani

—But you're the smartie!”

Not long ago I read an article which presented a list of explanations for why female students leave philosophy, taken from elsewhere. I wish to address the broad issue of why some groups who have faced a history of discrimination are underrepresented, but with a slightly greater focus here on ethnic minority underrepresentation. Let us start with a quotation:

Dougherty, Baron and Miller (2015) provide a useful taxonomy of existing explanatory hypotheses concerning the steep decline in the proportion of women between introductory philosophy courses and

philosophy honours (majors), which they divide into five broad categories: *course content hypotheses*, *teaching method hypotheses* (e.g. implicit bias and Buckwalter-and-Stich-style hypotheses concerning gender differences in philosophical intuitions), *hostile atmosphere hypotheses* (e.g. discrimination and sexual harassment), *internalized stereotypes/gender schema hypotheses* (e.g. stereotype threat), and the *impractical subject hypothesis*. (2020: 167)

There are explanations not on this list which I would expect to see. For example, a missing explanation which one sometimes hears is “I am a talented person but these people are not good at talent management, so it is not a good idea for me to continue working with them.” They lack the talent for talent management! The explanation can be adapted for individuals at different stages. For example, if someone is scoring well in multiple disciplines as an undergraduate, they see our philosophers and think, “No way would I put my talent in their hands.” I am not sure how much truth there is in an account which raises concerns about talent management.¹ Anyway, I actually wish to make a distinction between merely not having much talent for talent management and being an expert of failure.

Non-adaptive management. Imagine that a promising Argentine student joins a department in the north of England and begins research on alternative conceptual schemes. I shall focus on ethnic minority underrepresentation – for convenience of expression, let us suppose that I am the department head and the supervisor of this student and furthermore a white man. (Which of these is the most

¹ Regarding some analytic philosophers, people may be of the opinion “If you give this person university library access from around age 18 onwards, they will probably make academic contributions by around 30. Various details may be different though.”

bizarre?) I guide students towards certain readings. “Make sure you know Donald Davidson’s paper ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ and the objection that it is verificationist: he apparently denies that others could have an alternative conceptual scheme, on the basis of our being unable to verify that they have such a scheme. You need to evaluate that objection.” Also “What about Wittgenstein and conceptual schemes. Hasn’t Michael Lynch got a good paper on this?”

Now remember that fictional Chinese encyclopedia from Argentine literature. Our Argentine knows a lot of responses to that, most of which are in other languages. He suggests he could write on these. I become hesitant and say that I shall get back to him on that. I consult others, such as Chris Daly, but never get back to him. I have a model in my mind of a good solid provincial student on this topic and I am trying to turn him into that. His talent level is roughly the same as our local English students, maybe slightly higher or lower – I am not very sensitive to these fine differences, at least in this fiction. In the end he produces work somewhat like this hypothetical local student I have in mind, but unfortunately fails to get any postdoctoral fellowships or lectureships here. He returns to his own country.

Experts in failure. The hypothetical student discussed above is just slightly more talented than average and one uses management techniques which do not make the best use of his knowledge and his abilities. Anyone can do that! If you are not happy with what happened, you can say that I don’t have much talent for talent management. And you can try to explain, or partly explain, the composition of English philosophy departments based on staff members such as me above, or the me in the example.

The experts in failure hypothesis is something different. Some ethnic

minorities or some overseas group is keen to have a place in the English system, let us imagine. They encourage a person to apply who scores 10 out of 10 on my rating system in a number of areas: determination, logic, command of English, knowledge of the local philosophy, interest in it, etc. Most people could not produce a failure in philosophy with this person, but experts in failure can. There is a man who calls me up. "Is he Borges?" asks the man about the new student. This man who phoned is not Chris Daly and I would not describe him as a friend exactly. "He may not be quite Borges level," is my reply. The man on the phone is laughing, I believe, though it is not evident from his voice. Also, how he got my number is a mystery. "What I suggest is..." I follow the man's advice, producing a surprising failure.

References

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