

Explaining underrepresentation, then and now

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Abstract. I respond to a list of hypotheses explaining why female undergraduates leave philosophy by drawing attention to the period at which we are at and how it affects the task of explanation. I actually focus on ethnic minority underrepresentation, but what I say crosses over: undergraduates one is hoping to attract might well think, “There has to be some problem if these are the proportions at this stage.”

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There is a literature on underrepresentation in philosophy in the analytic tradition – the shortage of women, of ethnic minorities, and probably other underrepresentations. But I sometimes find it hard to take the literature too seriously. The famous bases for analytic philosophy are elite universities in the English speaking world. These universities are all located in countries described as first world or developed. You do not get to be such a country without advanced problem-solving skills. Furthermore, is there not some rather close connection between analytic philosophy and the governing class? If people of influence in the field want this problem solved, surely it would be solved quickly. It is difficult not to infer that the desire to solve this problem is largely absent.

But on second thought, maybe the problem is actually more difficult to solve than it seems. For we are at a later stage now. An article by two philosophers reports some hypotheses about why female undergraduates leave philosophy:

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*. (Beebee and McCallion 2020: 167)

I shall focus on ethnic minority underrepresentation, regarding which at least some of these hypotheses can be applied. Imagine two students, Rishi and Sajid let us unimaginatively call them, who are at a university in the north of England. Like many undergraduates, they study multiple disciplines before specializing. Rishi studies computer science and philosophy, and Sajid studies economics and philosophy. They are getting good grades in all subjects. One day Rishi says to Sajid, “I cannot see any ethnic minorities in philosophy. There has to be some problem. I think I shall major in computer science.” Sajid says, “I think I’ll major in economics. There will probably be a supportive community there.”

Undergraduates do not need to subscribe to one of the hypotheses listed in the quotation for them to have a reason to avoid going further with philosophy, despite being people who would or might well otherwise continue. Given how long ethnic minorities have been attending universities in England, the following is a sensible line

of reasoning: “Underrepresentation still: there has to be some problem, even if I don’t know what the problem is.”

A philosophy department might still attract minorities at later undergraduate or postgraduate level, but probably ones who don’t reason like this. They just really love philosophy, for example. The absence of minorities at this stage does not put them off. They do not think too much about why that situation exists and what it might mean for their future, or they do but it does not faze them.

But a lot of philosophy these days, at least in the analytic tradition, is done by solid skilled competent workers, or at least ones who give the impression of being so: they specialize; they have a thorough knowledge of the specialist literature; they make almost no obvious errors in their specialist work; they discuss relevant objections; etc. The minorities that the philosophy department still somehow attracts might not be suited to that! Interactions like the following occur. A professor, who is a member of various respected societies and associations, says, “So you want to be A PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHER?” But the student being addressed does not have the concept of a professional philosopher and perhaps never will, or does not in a way that enables the message to get through. The kind of people this professor is looking for are like Richie and Sajid, not like this student.

We are left with this puzzling combination:

- (a) The future of academic philosophy is as a professional system of numerous competent specialists, clarifying concepts that were previously unclarified, conducting reviews, examining objections, and making progress in their specialisms in other ways.
- (b) Philosophy needs to solve its underrepresentation problem. Its faculty

neighbours score better with this problem and that looks awful.

- (c) Owing to the late stage, students from underrepresented groups with the talent and temperament suited to being competent specialists assume there is a problem. And the underrepresented group members who do not leave are unsuited to such a system.

In relation to the analytic tradition in England, it would not be surprising if most places focusing on this abandon (b). The small provincial philosophy department must remain mostly white, English, posh, and male, with one or two women and a token minority perhaps. What is the alternative? It must be rather complicated!

Appendix

Why did those politicians, whose forenames I took the liberty of using, resign?
I don't know. I had peculiar experiences at a university in the last two days which led me to write a poem:

Using its guest system midday
I find websites taken away,
No google docs and I've grown slack
Searching for those little terrors
I mean grammatical errors:
The hey in a needlestack

Reference. Beebee, H. and McCallion, A-M. 2020. "In Defence of Different Voices."
Symposion 7 (2): 149-177.