

Underrepresentation and the hostile atmosphere hypothesis: a distinction

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Abstract. Why are some disciplines lacking in members from certain groups, for example why has there been female underrepresentation in English-speaking analytic philosophy or a shortage of ethnic minorities? In this paper, I distinguish between two versions of the hostile atmosphere hypothesis.

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“Each time the Sphinx would sing

All the other birds took wing.”

Why are there so few members of a certain historically discriminated group in a certain field? For example, why, in philosophy in the analytic tradition, at least in the English speaking world, are there few females and few ethnic minorities. An article helpfully conveys some hypotheses, focusing on female underrepresentation:

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)

The hostile atmosphere hypothesis is a natural starting point and would presumably be suggested by people lacking insider knowledge. But it is worth distinguishing between two versions: an obvious and direct version, which the quotation above already conceives by its parenthetical example, and a more indirect version, which probably there is less awareness of.

The obvious and direct version says that group X are largely absent because group X are subject to hostile behaviour, for example derogatory comments concerning appearance. The less obvious and indirect version says, “You may find no trace of hostility towards group X but there is hostility to someone else, or some others, and this hostility produces the result that many members of group X leave.” Their thinking might well be: “We see how you treat that person and we sort-of identify with that person and so we don’t trust you, though you are nice enough to us at present.”

My intuition is that the people engaged in ongoing hostile behaviour largely do not get the results they desire. It is too early to determine what will happen in the recently famous Kathleen Stock case, but I presume researchers in various fields will say, “I am not going to work at the English provincial university or I shall work there only briefly.” I don’t agree with some of her views, probably many of them, but the effect of that scandal is unlikely to be localized to people with those views, as may be hoped. Some academic in some field thinks, “I am around that level in my field and I am opposed to certain crowd demands but I cannot be bothered with those kinds of

problems. I think I shall just leave the country, or leave after a couple of years.”

Reference

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