

How Might We Address the Factors that Contribute to the Scarcity of Philosophers Who Are Women and/or of Color?

YOLONDA Y. WILSON

Professional philosophy in the US remains relatively homogenous. I use four anecdotes to amplify some of the practices that may contribute to the dearth of underrepresented philosophers. Each anecdote highlights a different problem—lack of proper mentoring, stereotype threat, difficulties navigating sexism, and a sense of exclusion. Although I discuss each of these issues separately, it is certainly the case that these (and other issues) can and often do occur concurrently. I offer preliminary thoughts on how these problems could be addressed while keeping in mind that philosophy in the US is a microcosm of the larger US society.

It is known that there is a dearth of underrepresented philosophers: women of all races, men who are not white, those who are differently-abled, and those who identify as other than heterosexual. It is important for those of us who think that the discipline would be enriched by the inclusion of different voices to consider the variety of reasons that our departments and the discipline at large persist as relatively homogeneous places. By so doing, we become empowered to take important steps to recruit, encourage, and support those who are underrepresented to enter the field and to flourish—at the undergraduate and graduate levels and continuing through entry into the profession. As a contribution to the conversation about increasing the number of underrepresented philosophers in the discipline, I begin with four anecdotes and work backwards through them in my discussion. Anecdotes can be quite useful both in helping to approach this problem from different angles and in the development of possible solutions.

1. Colleague A and Colleague B are having a conversation about the dearth of women in philosophy. Colleague A proudly remarks that he is proactive about encouraging undergraduate women he encounters in class to become philosophy majors. Colleague B presses Colleague A for details. “Do you make specific

- overtures to women in your class who seem particularly interested?” “Oh, yes!” Colleague A exclaims. “In fact, one young woman wrote one of the better papers in the class, and I told her so.” Underwhelmed, Colleague B let the matter drop.
2. Faculty member X is asked to speculate about the small number of African Americans pursuing PhDs in philosophy. His response, “Well, we had one a few years back, and it didn’t work out. . .” before trailing off. He tries again, “You know, philosophy programs have a logic requirement. . . .”
 3. Junior Woman Philosopher encounters Senior Male Philosopher in the hallway. “Those are beautiful shoes,” Senior Male Philosopher notes. “Thank you,” replies Junior Woman Philosopher. Senior Male Philosopher continues, “I’d love for a woman to wear nothing but those shoes and walk on my back.” He is met with Junior Woman Philosopher’s stunned silence.
 4. Late-stage Woman of Color Graduate Philosophy Student enters the department lounge to check her mail. New White Male Graduate Philosophy Student sees her enter the lounge and asks if she’s lost. “No, getting my mail,” she casually replies. New White Male Graduate Philosophy Student steps, arms outstretched, in front of the mailboxes and tells Late-Stage Woman of Color Graduate Philosophy Student, “These mailboxes are for faculty and graduate students. You have no business here.”

4, REVISITED

This final anecdote is my own. I wonder how many other members of underrepresented populations are told in one form or another that they have no business in philosophy departments, and I wonder how those students respond to being told that they don’t belong? In my own case, I responded to the general sense of not belonging by avoiding the department as much as possible, simultaneously protecting myself from such slights and also reinforcing my own sense of isolation from and within the philosophy department. However, this strategy of “cutting emotional losses,” as Amy Olberding notes, has potential negative long-term consequences for one’s career and may partially explain why women don’t advance in the profession or leave altogether (Olberding 2014, 292). This was not the only such incident during my graduate years (or even in the years since I’ve entered the profession), and my experience is hardly unique. In fact, if one could be a fly on the wall of a gathering of so-called underrepresented philosophers, some of the stories one would hear are much worse.

It is important that we think seriously about how graduate students interact with one another not only because of the impact that such interactions have on their fellow graduate students (although this is important in itself), but also because graduate students have a significant role in shaping the culture (and the perception of the culture) of philosophy departments. Graduate students are not solely at the mercy of faculty members. Graduate students wield power over one another, and they certainly wield power over the undergraduates they teach. Sometimes an undergraduate’s first

contact with the philosophy department comes from interactions with graduate-student instructors. We must be assured that our teaching assistants and teaching fellows are treating the undergraduates in their classes with fundamental respect. But, if this kind of respect is not even extended to all graduate students, then I worry what this means for undergraduates.

To clarify: although even the most socially maladapted graduate instructor would probably refrain from being overtly or explicitly hostile to underrepresented students, this graduate student might plausibly engage in subtle behavior that is harmful. Literature in the social sciences bears this out: identical term papers and CVs are ranked lower by evaluators when the name attached to the term paper or CV is “identifiably” black as opposed to white or female as opposed to male (Haslanger 2008, 213). One, albeit imperfect, solution to term-paper bias is anonymous grading.¹ However, many of our other interactions are not anonymous. We must be cognizant of how race and gender may play into students’ comfort with speaking up in class, and the subtle ways we validate students such that we reinforce hierarchy. Nodding, smiling, and asking follow-up questions are all ways that instructors in the classroom signal to students that their ideas are worthwhile. Meanwhile, frowning, being dismissive, and failing to ask for clarification are ways that instructors signal to students that we think otherwise. Recently K. L. Milkman, M. Akinola, and D. Chugh found that women and minorities who initiated contact with professors in the humanities were ignored at 1.4 times the rate of white men (Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2015, 1700). This willingness to give students who are white and male the benefit of the doubt creates a feedback loop that encourages them to continue to pursue their education, while discouraging those who are women and/or of color.

3, REVISITED

The “shoe incident” calls to mind the work of legal theorist Deborah Brake. Whereas the dominant cultural narrative is that people who belong to underrepresented groups are hyper-vigilant and poised to cry “racism” or “sexism” at every turn, it seems that the actual picture is more complex (Brake 2007, 684–85). Women actually experience gender bias more frequently than we perceive (685). Additionally, the perception of gender bias is not always immediate. Rather, it often takes a minute to “sink in,” which leads to internal questions about whether it is “worth it” to pursue once the moment passes. This moment of sinking in is sometimes complicated by the fact that the bias experienced may be subtle or difficult to prove, a phenomenon Olberding refers to as “subclinical bias” (Olberding 2014, 288).

Furthermore, members of underrepresented groups have strong incentives not to view themselves as “victims” or potential victims who are thin-skinned, complaining, or in need of coddling—particularly in instances when an experience of bias might have another plausible, nonbiased explanation. So, women often do not perceive interactions that would objectively count as instances of gender bias or sexual harassment as such. Even when we do perceive sexist interactions for what they are, there

is a reluctance to address the interactions directly. This creates a threefold problem: (1) Bad actors are not called out for their bad behavior—which means that the “baddest” of the bad actors (those who know but don’t care that their behavior is sexist, biased, or harassing) are allowed to behave with impunity. Meanwhile, the unintentionally bad actors are never made aware that their behavior is sexist, biased, or harassing—thus depriving them of the opportunity to do better. (2) Women who have these experiences second-guess themselves. They think, “Maybe it’s just me,” and in turn, suffer in silence. (3) Not reporting leads even the most well-intentioned departments to underestimate the extent to which these incidents occur. Departments may assume that everything is fine because no one has told them that *not* everything is fine. They are left scratching their heads when women don’t come to the department or they come but don’t stay or they stay but don’t engage. Taking steps to seriously combat sexism in departments creates a better atmosphere for women at all levels—undergraduate, graduate, and faculty. The Site Visit Program established by the APA Committee on the Status of Women is one attempt to address issues related to climate in philosophy departments (APA 2016). Site visit teams visit departments at the department’s request, meet or interview the faculty, students, support staff, and other members of the department, and report their findings while offering concrete suggestions for improving the climate in a department. This information is an invaluable tool for a department that is serious about ensuring that the departmental climate is hospitable.

2, REVISITED

Claude Steele and others have found that members of stigmatized groups perform worse when their stigmatized status is called to their attention (Steele 1997, 614). When the stereotype that black people can’t do logic (for example) is activated in black students, the level of worry about conforming to stereotype escalates to the point where performance suffers. Being an “only”—the “only” woman, the “only” racial minority—can have a similar effect as stereotype threat, even in the absence of specific negative stereotypes or stigma (Haslanger 2008, 218). Performance anxiety, the worry that your poor performance reflects poorly not just on you, but on everyone of your “kind,” can be paralyzing to a degree that those who are not underrepresented rarely experience.

Sometimes students who are having difficulty come to us concerned about their underwhelming performance (whether the performance is underwhelming according to the standards that they set for themselves or objectively underwhelming). We give our canned speech: Philosophy is hard; you’ve never done this before. . . (many of us have this down to a science—we pause, we nod, we look earnestly into the student’s eyes. . .). Sometimes that is all a student needs. A measure of relief washes over the student’s face, he or she gathers belongings and leaves the office, and we pat ourselves on the back for having been so sensitive and astute.

But have we been so sensitive and astute? And if not, what have we missed? Even students who have never taken a philosophy course before have experienced learning something new. So students are not unaware that some activities have a steeper learning curve than others. We do our students a disservice when we assume that the mere fact of difficulty is the source of the anxiety for underrepresented students. Our attempts at reassurance can come across both as patronizing and as subtly suggesting that students either don't like to be challenged or aren't up for the challenge. We might not intend to convey this, but this is exactly what we convey.

Often students in those circumstances can't or don't feel comfortable articulating this worry to us. So, the onus is on us to probe more deeply when students come to us worried about their performance. I am not suggesting that we assume that every worry is grounded in concerns about stereotype threat, but I *am* suggesting that we shouldn't automatically default to the "philosophy is hard" speech. Because if, in fact, the student is not expressing a worry about the *level* of difficulty (as opposed to performance anxiety, for example), then the student can leave our offices feeling exasperated, or worse, insulted. Students can feel the soft bigotry of low expectations. "They don't like the logic requirement," is overly simplistic, lazy, and absolves philosophers of the responsibility to figure out exactly what is happening.

1, REVISITED

When we encounter underrepresented students who seem to have an interest in philosophy, it may take a bit more work to get them to pursue philosophy. If we are serious about this, then we have to be willing to put in the work. In her exploration of why undergraduate women do not pursue the philosophy major, Cheshire Calhoun found that perceived similarity contributed to women's interest in the major (Calhoun 2015, 482). That is, to the extent that women did not imagine themselves as conforming to stereotypes of philosophers—socially awkward, poorly dressed, narrowly interested only in philosophy—women did not imagine themselves as philosophers and, in turn, did not pursue the major (482–83). Calhoun notes that if she is right, then we have good reason to worry about the nature and persistence of stereotypes about who philosophers are.² Although Calhoun did not find that stereotype threat or perceived sexism played a significant role in women's interest in the major in the empirical literature that she surveyed, she acknowledges that it is important to continue to investigate these possibilities. In the meantime, it might be the case that challenging the stereotype of who philosophers are would be an easy first step in broadening the perception of philosophers—especially for women students.

In "Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American Experience," Charles Mills writes, "I suggest that a major contributory cause [of the small numbers of black students pursuing graduate degrees in philosophy] is the self-sustaining dynamic of the 'whiteness' of philosophy, not the uncontroversial whiteness of skin of most of its practitioners, but what could be called, more contestably, the *conceptual* or *theoretical* whiteness of the discipline" (Mills 1998, 2). He goes on to explore the

misogyny present in many classic works of philosophy as a way of understanding the discomfort that women often feel in philosophy classes and notes that, by comparison, there is relatively little explicit racism espoused by the classic thinkers (2–3). Instead, he notes that there is a “guilty silence” about race.

For Mills, the problem for black students who encounter (especially the canonical) texts in philosophy (this problem also holds for women, albeit differently) is that their bullshit detectors start pinging and the pinging is never addressed in any serious, systematic way. Sometimes faculty will offer the footnote/apology: “Philosopher X was a product of his time. Let’s not allow a few unfortunate statements to take away from the arguments, the *real* work of philosophy.” The fact that these issues aren’t taken seriously is enough to turn off underrepresented would-be philosophy majors.

I do not buy this. Many of the canonical figures in English were no fans of women, but English does not suffer from a dearth of women. And historians and anthropologists have certainly held misguided views about nonwhite people all over the world. Yet there is still a critical mass of nonwhite historians and anthropologists. So though Mills’s intuition may account for some of the story, it certainly cannot be all of the story, and it probably is not even most of the story. Although I hate the dismissive tone that often accompanies the “let’s focus on the arguments” response, this cannot be sufficient to send underrepresented students running in droves away from philosophy departments. These issues should be addressed as more than a pedagogical footnote, and it is the responsibility of everyone to do it—not just the black professor and/or the woman professor. When these issues are ignored by white and/or male professors and are only taken up by the professors who are female and/or nonwhite, the message that is sent to students is that these are not “real” issues and that the nonwhite and/or female professor merely has an ax to grind.

Further, to suggest that the presence of racism and sexism in the canon is a major reason for the lack of racial and gender diversity in philosophy departments is to implicitly suggest that students who are women and/or nonwhite *only* or *primarily* care about race and gender. This assumption can deprive underrepresented students of the opportunity to explore a broad range of topics in philosophy because the assumption can drive faculty to subtly (or not so subtly) steer students exclusively into race and/or gender topics, regardless of the student’s own area(s) of interest. Thus, underrepresented students are not simply deprived of intellectual opportunities; they are stereotyped and essentialized.³ I appreciate that these assumptions may come from a sincere place, but I worry that this is the intellectual equivalent of manufacturing pink tool boxes and pink guns in an attempt to make women more interested in carpentry and shooting. It shows a lack of reflection about why those who are nonwhite and/or women might make the choices we make, and instead goes for the easy fix. Furthermore, the ghettoizing of both certain students and certain topics reinforces the idea that certain students are interested only in certain topics and that others (read: white men) have no interest or investment in these topics. The clustering and ghettoizing also contributes to the view that these areas of inquiry are not serious and should not be taken seriously. That is, only some can do “real” philosophy, but, for example, anyone who shows up with a vagina can do feminist philosophy.

It is important that Colleague A sought out the young woman in his class to tell her that he thought she wrote one of the better papers in his class. It also would have been wonderful for him to go a further step and inquire about her other intellectual interests, and perhaps, to have recommended additional philosophy courses based on her expressed interests.

UPSHOT?

These anecdotes have provided a way for me to explore some of the behaviors and practices that dissuade women and/or students of color from pursuing the undergraduate major in philosophy, continuing through graduate study, and eventually entering and remaining in the profession. Some are lost at every stage in the process, which yields a profession that is relentlessly white and male. My discussions of these anecdotes have allowed me to reflect on why each of these kinds of cases turned out the way it did and to offer some preliminary ideas about how they might be addressed so that underrepresented students remain in the discipline and flourish.

However, as insular as philosophy departments often are, they are also microcosms of larger society. I know what it is (most days) to move through the world in a body that is cis and black and woman. I don't leave the world behind when I enter a philosophy department and neither does anyone else. Attitudes about who belongs where and under what circumstances permeate the larger culture. To that extent, some of the hand-wringing about the lack of women and/or students of color as philosophy undergraduate majors, graduate students, and members of the profession feels a little disingenuous. I am not suggesting that, as a result, we should do nothing. I am suggesting that these matters cannot be disentangled from broader social-justice issues of racism and sexism. A real commitment to caring about how racism and sexism work in philosophy necessarily commits one to caring about these issues generally.

NOTES

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Workshop on the Recruitment and Retention of Undergraduate Women and Other Underrepresented Minorities in Philosophy, held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, April 2014. I thank the audience for their attention and helpful remarks. I would also would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and thoughtful comments.

1. There has been discussion on several academic blogs regarding whether anonymous grading is actually a useful tool for reducing or removing bias. Some worries include the fact that students are not actually anonymous if graders have previously seen or discussed drafts of the work and that graders may recognize handwriting. Additionally, some worry that it may be difficult to gauge a student's progress if all assignments are graded anonymously. See, generally, Novaes 2013; Amar 2014; Weinberg 2015.

2. An example of an attempt to combat stereotypes of scientists and, in turn, to attract girls and young women into STEM careers is the Science Cheerleaders. This organization was formed by Darlene Cavalier, a former Philadelphia 76ers cheerleader and scientist, and now boasts over 200 members—all women who are current or former NFL, NBA, and other professional sports league cheerleaders who also have STEM careers. Although the organization itself is not affiliated with any academic institution, the Science Cheerleaders have garnered national press from their public appearances, and some of their partnerships have included NASA and the National Science Foundation. I am by no means suggesting that women philosophers wave pompoms in an attempt to attract women majors (and there is much that might be critiqued about using the “sexy cheerleader” trope to combat the “nerdy scientist” stereotype), but the rationale is an interesting one. That is, if Calhoun’s findings are correct, girls and young women are less interested in majoring in philosophy and the sciences in part because they do not identify with the stereotypes that persist about the types of people who select those majors. The Science Cheerleaders see themselves as doing their part to resist these stereotypes and to attract women majors. See www.sciencecheerleader.com (accessed October 6, 2016).

3. Thank you to my anonymous reviewer for helping me strengthen this point.

REFERENCES

- Amar, Vikram David. 2014. Why “blind” grading makes good sense, and should be used more extensively outside of the context of law school exams. *Verdict: Legal Analysis and Commentary from Justia*, January 17. <https://verdict.justia.com/2014/01/17/blind-grading-makes-good-sense-used-extensively-outside-context-law-school-exams> (accessed October 4, 2016).
- American Philosophical Association (APA) Committee on the Status of Women. 2016. Site visit program. www.apaonlinecsw.org/home/site-visit-program (accessed June 16, 2016).
- Brake, Deborah L. 2007. Perceiving subtle sexism: Mapping the social-psychological forces and legal narratives that obscure gender bias. *Columbia Journal of Gender and the Law* 16 (3): 679–723.
- Calhoun, Cheshire. 2015. Precluded interests. *Hypatia* 30 (2): 475–85.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2008. Changing the ideology and culture of philosophy: Not by reason (alone). *Hypatia* 23 (2): 210–23.
- Milkman, K. L., M. Akinola, and D. Chugh. 2015. What happens before? A field experiment exploring how pay and representation differentially shape bias on the pathway into organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 100 (6): 1678–712.
- Mills, Charles. 1998. Non-Cartesian sums: Philosophy and the African American experience. In *Blackness visible: Essays on philosophy and race*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Novaes, Catarina Dutilh. 2013. On anonymous grading. *New APPS: Art, Politics, Philosophy, Science*, May 2. www.newappsblog.com/2013/05/on-anonymous-grading.html (accessed April 28, 2017).

- Olberding, Amy. 2014. Subclinical bias, manners, and moral harm. *Hypatia* 29 (2): 287–302.
- Steele, Claude. 1997. A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist* 52 (6): 613–29.
- Weinberg, Justin. 2015. Is anonymous grading better? *The Daily Nous*, December 15. <http://dailynous.com/2015/12/15/is-anonymous-grading-really-better/> (accessed April 28, 2017).