

Why Are Women Underrepresented in the Profession?

Why are women underrepresented in the profession? This is, I think, a very difficult question indeed, and a variety of answers have been offered. Consider, for example, two very different environmental explanations. On the one hand, there is a view that appears to be accepted by the APA Committee on the Status of Women, according to which at least one very important cause of the underrepresentation of women in the profession involves the university environment, with women being treated differently in classrooms than men, or with many male philosophers being hostile to female philosophers. On the other hand, there is a very different environmental explanation, according to which the underrepresentation of women in philosophy – and certain other fields, such as mathematics and physics – is due to the different ways in which male and female children are raised.

The problem is that deciding between these two hypotheses, as well as between other explanations that have been proposed, clearly requires very extensive scientific research indeed, and research that has not been carried out. This is very unfortunate, since the issue is of great importance. So, for example, if it is true that underrepresentation of women in the profession involves the university environment, with women being treated differently in classrooms than men, or with many male philosophers being hostile to female philosophers, then one has good reason to think that site visits have the potential for doing a world of good in pointing out to members of a department the unhealthy climate for women that exists in that department, and then by both strongly encouraging the department to change that climate, and providing it with ways of doing so.

On the other hand, if the underrepresentation of women in the profession is due instead to the differing ways in which male and female children are raised, then there is no reason to think that site visits will bring about an increase in the proportion of philosophers who are women.

This situation, where there is a very important issue that can only be confidently answered given scientific research that has not yet been carried out, is clearly not a happy one. Still, even though one is operating in a scientific vacuum, it is possible that there are considerations that provide reasons for concluding that one explanation is more likely than another to turn out to be true.

Let me attempt to say, then, why I think that the underrepresentation of women in philosophy, rather than being due to any negative climate in university classrooms or departments, is due instead to the different ways in which male and female children are raised.

The first point is that philosophy is not alone with regard to the underrepresentation of women. Consider the following figures from a National Science Foundation “Survey of Earned Doctorates”¹ for the year 2012:

Subject	Percentage of Doctorates Earned by Women
Mathematics:	28.3

¹ <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/sed/2012/pdf/tab16.pdf>

Philosophy:	26.8
Physics:	19.4

The question to which these figures give rise is whether the underrepresentation of women in mathematics and physics is to be explained in the same way as in the case of philosophy, or in a different way. The idea that different explanations are to be given strikes me as quite implausible. But if one offers the same explanation, and if it is the explanation just mentioned, then one is thereby committed to the view that one very important cause of the underrepresentation of women in mathematics involves the university environment, with women being treated differently in mathematics classrooms than men are treated, or with many male mathematicians being hostile to female mathematicians, or both, and similarly in the case of physics. Is this at all plausible?

If one does think that this is plausible, consider the following figures from the same document:

Subject	Percentage of Doctorates Earned by Women
Psychology:	71.0
Anthropology:	65.9

If hostile attitudes and harassing behavior on the part of men explain the low percentage of doctorates earned by women in mathematics, philosophy, and physics, why don't the same hostile attitudes and harassing behavior on the part of men also generate a low percentage of doctorates earned by women in psychology and anthropology, just as they supposedly do in the case of philosophy?

Moreover, if one thinks that the underrepresentation of women in philosophy is to be explained in terms of a bad climate for women, would one also accept the idea that the nearly comparable underrepresentation of men in psychology is to be explained in terms of a bad climate for men?

Are we to conclude, then, that there must be a very hostile climate for men in these disciplines, one that needs to be addressed by a vigorous program of investigative site visits? In fact no one is suggesting this. And yet the argument for this appears to be just as good as the argument that the gender imbalance in philosophy is the result of a hostile climate towards women.

The basic point here is that there are many possible alternative explanations of the underrepresentation of women in philosophy. I myself favor a different environmental explanation, one that focuses on both **interests** and **traits of character**. As regards the first, one has only to wander through a toy store to see the very different toys that are marketed to boys and girls, and then to think a bit about the quite different interests that will be fostered by those different toys. Accordingly, it seems to me that it may very well be the case that the interests that boys typically develop as a result of this socialization process are ones that help to make mathematics, physics, and philosophy more interesting, and more appealing to boys than to girls. If so, that explains, at least in part, why fewer women than men pursue a major in philosophy.

Second, I think that it is also the case that certain traits of character are crucial to success in the most challenging intellectual disciplines, and that the different ways in which boys and girls are socialized, and perhaps also the different ways in which they may be treated in elementary and secondary schools, makes it unfortunately less likely that women will come to possess those traits of character that make for success in the more difficult, and more abstract, disciplines.

In short, I think it is quite plausible that the different ways in which boys and girls are raised and socialized tends to foster the development of quite different interests and traits of character, and that this provides a much more plausible explanation of the underrepresentation of women in philosophy, mathematics, and physics than any hypothesis that appeals to hostility towards women or to a bad climate for women in the relevant disciplines

Here is some anecdotal evidence in support of the effect of one's early environment upon one's later success in certain very demanding and challenging fields. When we lived in Australia, my wife, Sylvia, had a friend named Cheryl Praeger, who was doing a Ph.D. in mathematics. Cheryl mentioned, one time, that she hadn't initially excelled in mathematics in elementary school until her parents shifted her out of a coeducational school into an all-girls school, at which point she took off. After completing her Ph.D., Cheryl became only the second woman ever to have become a full professor of mathematics in Australia, and she has had an extraordinarily distinguished career.²

Here is another story. One of my close philosophical friends in Australia was also very strong chess player. We were talking one time about the great chess players of the past, and the question came up as to why there had been virtually no great women players, with Vera Menchik being the only one that came to mind at the time. My friend thought that the explanation was genetic; I claimed it was environmental. But I was not really able to offer much in the way of strong support for my view.

That, however, was before the advent of the three Polgár sisters – Susan, Sofia, and Judit.³ Their father, László Polgár⁴, believed that geniuses were made, not born, and so he home educated all three of his daughters, concentrating on chess. All three became grandmasters, with the youngest, Judit, becoming a grandmaster at the age of fifteen years and four months – the youngest person, at that time, ever to achieve that status. I think that my friend would now concede that, on this matter, I was right, though it could be contended – albeit not, in my opinion, with much plausibility – that given that they were sisters, they just happened to share great genes for chess!

In short, I'm not convinced that the underrepresentation of women in our profession is to be explained by some sort of negative climate for women in philosophy departments. I believe that a much more plausible explanation is in terms of much earlier environmental factors, and ones that also explain the underrepresentation of women in other areas, such as mathematics, physics, and

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheryl_Praeger

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judit_Polgar

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laszlo_Polgar

chess. (It was for that reason, incidentally, that my wife and I chose to home educate our own two daughters.)