

PREFERENTIAL HIRING AS A RESPONSE TO NARROW ACADEMIC TASTES

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Most, maybe all, universities in Canada have official policies directing academic hiring committees to show favour to female applicants. These policies have been around for decades and show no sign of being rescinded.

One rationale for such policies is that they counteract the effects of the often subconscious or ingrained sexist biases through which many academics, like everybody else, see the world. These biases prevent members of hiring committees from objectively or fairly appraising the skills and accomplishments of women candidates.

There may well be solid empirical evidence that biases against women in the professions continue to exert their malign influence. I'm thinking of studies that show potential employers ranking higher a résumé or CV when it is submitted under a man's rather than a woman's name, or that show potential employers thinking well of a man when he expresses some particular character trait (candour, say) but not of a woman when she does.

Now even if the pernicious sexism these studies reveal has a discernible effect on university hiring, we might respond either that the effects of affirmative action policies are at least no less pernicious than those of sexism or that there are many better ways to combat sexist attitudes than to restrict or guide the judgements of hiring committee members. These, at any rate, have been the responses various SAFS members have made over the years.

This particular rationale for giving precedence to female applicants, though, presupposes that men and women academics are engaged in more or less the same academic projects and are undertaking them in more or less similar ways. Men and women sociologists are equally interested in understanding and explaining violent crime in large cities, say, and they pursue their research by collecting and correlating data or by interviewing criminals and their victims. The rationale we're discussing, that is, does not suppose there to be a male sociology and a female sociology.

Moreover, it does not presuppose that men and women are equally interested in or equally good at sociology. Consistent with this rationale is that women, or men, for reasons of brain physiology or culturally acquired temperament, are more given to sociological inquiry and more likely to experience sociological insight than are members of the other sex. The rationale depends simply on the claim that those women candidates who are just as good at sociology as the male candidates will, because of sexism, fail to be credited as just as good.

Policies justified by this rationale will not, then, have as their goal increasing the representation of women in the professoriate, even if that is the result their backers hope for. Their goal is entirely to allow talented women—"talent" understood in its most conventional sense—to shine and be seen to shine.

Of course, the subconscious-sexist-bias rationale is not the only rationale given by those who advocate preferential hiring policies. And though it has long been popular and influential, it is today, I think, in eclipse.

A very different rationale for official policies to hire women, the most powerful rationale these days, makes little use of the contention that sexist biases prevent individual academics from properly appreciating what they would recognize as excellent work were it not the work of a woman. This second rationale denies that there is a single sociology to which men and women should have equal opportunity of access. It denies, that is, that there is a

single sociology. There are, instead, many sociologies (many mathematics, biologies, literary studies, histories, philosophies, engineerings). There are as many mansions within each disciplinary house as there are types of inquiring people. Women constitute a type, a type distinguished from men, and women can be expected to go about a different sort of academic business than men, and to go about that business differently.

The idea is not that women are essentially feminine in their interests and ways and men essentially masculine. The idea is only that, as a matter of fact, more women than men are interested in personal and concrete relationships, say, while more men than women are interested in impersonal or abstract relationships. Just what the tendencies are within the sexes is an empirical matter, of course, though perhaps empirical study will bear out to some degree the clichés or stereotypes we've all grown up with.

How the particular matters-of-fact with regard to different tendencies in concerns and tastes between the sexes are explained is irrelevant to the challenges to which the matters-of-fact give rise. Sex-correlated differences might be explained biologically, they might be explained culturally, and they are probably a complex mix of both. One or another difference might be in flux, there might be less difference (or more) than there was decades ago, and some difference or other might be on its way out. Still, if there are statistical differences between the sexes, then academic departments that don't house an equal number of men and women professors are favouring some topics or styles of thought over others.

This second rationale, then, is a rationale for giving precedence to women candidates for the sake of promoting underrepresented fields or schools or styles—the fields, schools, or styles associated with women academics.

Those who appeal to the second rationale will often speak of departments or programs as *gendered*, meaning that the topics covered or approaches taken within the department or program appeal more to men than to women. But why should that matter, so long as candidates for positions in the department or program are all treated fairly and appraised objectively? Indeed, why should the level of analysis and evaluation be that of departments and programs? If the university as a whole has a roughly equal number of women and men on faculty, then hasn't the goal of representing academic interests fairly been met? That a particular department in a more-or-less equal university has significantly more male professors and students than women professors and students would indicate simply that it's up to things men tend to prefer more than women do. Another department will have more women in it because the discipline it serves tends to appeal more to women.

Those who complain that certain disciplines are gendered reject this supposition, the supposition that in the contemporary university everyone already has the opportunity to study in a department or program that suits them.

I teach in a philosophy department, and philosophy departments, unlike other Humanities or Social Sciences departments, continue to have more male faculty members than female. The ratio in philosophy departments nationally might be three to one in favour of men, perhaps four to one.

As well, students in philosophy programs are mostly male. (Of the 19 Masters, Honours, and Majors students at my university, 14 are male. It's about even among our minors, though.) This is true despite the fact that the ratio in first-year philosophy courses is fairly close to one to one. Philosophy, as an academic discipline, has a gender difference in both faculty and students more in line with math or engineering than with English or history.

Those who contend that philosophy (or math, or engineering) is a gendered discipline say that female students would be majoring in philosophy or taking upper-level philosophy courses except that the topics or approaches in the courses on offer leave them cold. If they had courses they were interested in, and were taught in ways they enjoyed, they would choose philosophy over the other disciplines. Moreover, so long as women students leave or avoid philosophy, the percentage of women in philosophy departments will remain low.

Departments like philosophy, math, and engineering, then, the departments in which students and professors are predominately male, are remiss in not serving women as well as they could. They could be attempting to discover what in philosophy, math, and engineering female students are keen to study. Having found what they could do to attract and retain female students, they could do it.

Departments staffed with more male than female professors, which, typically, are departments with more male than female majors and other students, would be serving more female students, and serving the interests of women in society generally, if they hired more female professors. They would be serving female students and women generally because female professors would be more likely to teach topics of more interest to women, and in ways more congenial to women students. Since universities have responsibilities to their students and to the public, predominately male departments should be seeking to hire more women. These responsibilities are so important that it is not inappropriate to write rules designed to get them to hire more women, or so the argument goes.

Let me summarize the argument.

Women students and women professors tend to prefer some particular topics and approaches more than men do. In male-heavy departments, then, only a small proportion of the courses on offer will feature topics women tend to prefer or be taught in ways women tend to like. Women students will, as a consequence, fail to find the discipline as interesting as they might have found it, had it featured more of the topics and ways they prefer. They will leave for other departments. And so, to break this pattern, male-heavy departments need to hire more women professors.

The men in the male-heavy departments, though, tend to lack a taste for the topics and approaches women prefer. (Maybe they lack a taste because they don't work on the topics women tend to prefer or approach their topics in the ways women tend to prefer.) Thus, because they are not attuned, men on hiring committees will often fail to recognize the academic interest and value of the work female job candidates are doing. Although they apply their own criteria of worth dispassionately and fairly, by applying those criteria, they will tend to rank male candidates higher than female candidates.

The pattern of the department replicating its focus and style through new hires will not be broken, then, if hiring committee members are allowed to select candidates solely on grounds of what they, reasonably enough given their preferences, consider quality. For that reason, it is necessary that male-heavy departments and hiring committees be bound by policies and rules explicitly intended to increase the number of women professors.

That, I think, is the argument.

The policies and rules by which departments should be bound can take any number of forms and be directed at any of the levels of discussion preceding or during the hiring committee's deliberations. One policy a university might adopt with regard to male-heavy departments is that job ads specify only areas in which women academics predominate.

Another is that hiring committees be composed of more women than men. Another is that at least two-thirds of candidates interviewed be women.

Any such policy or rule will, certainly, constrain department members in the exercise of their judgement. But, comes the rejoinder, it is the shallowness of their judgement that has served women students and women academics so badly for so long.

Now, this argument requires that in fact women students and academics prefer certain topics or approaches in a particular discipline, rather than that they just prefer certain disciplines. It requires, that is, that they don't like this or that within philosophy or math, rather than that they simply don't like philosophy or math (compared to other disciplines). If women tend not to prefer philosophy or math while men do, then it makes little sense to try to bring more women into philosophy or math. It would be enough for the university to ensure that the departments in which women choose to study don't lack resources.

But let us suppose that the empirical claims made in the argument are correct. Let us suppose that an appreciable number of women students would take philosophy classes in certain topics or would take philosophy classes taught in certain ways, if those classes were available. Does the argument that policies to increase the proportion of women should be imposed on male-heavy departments actually hold?

I don't think it does. My objection to it, though, depends on a particular account of the nature and purpose of the university; not everyone shares that account of the university.

A university (on my account) is a place of liberal learning and it is a place of dispute or contention. By calling it a place of liberal learning, I mean that the people gathered in it, professors and students both, are engaged in dispassionate inquiry into the ways of the world. They seek understanding, and they seek understanding just for the sake of seeking and having understanding. By calling it a place of dispute or contention, I mean that the people gathered in it habitually dispute with each other, with scholars far away in place or time, and with themselves. They frame hypotheses and claims, and they attempt to refute the hypotheses and claims that get framed.

Liberal learning and dispute are, of course, connected. Dispute is a central method of dispassionate inquiry.

If a university is to have and maintain its character, as little as possible can be allowed to constrain the academic judgement of the people gathered in it when they are deciding academic matters. For otherwise, values and ideals other than academic will infect the university. Liberal learning will come more and more to be applied or useful learning, instruction intended and designed to prepare students for careers or to instil in them today's appropriate attitudes. Dispute will lose place to dogmatism and to the celebration of accomplishment and identity.

Policies and rules meant to increase the proportion of women in a department force the members of hiring committees to set aside their considered views of academic worth, and trust that academic value will take care of itself.

That is why such policies and rules are inappropriate, despite the fact, if it is a fact, that many women are unable to find the home they crave in the discipline of (say) philosophy or math.

A first critical response to my objection is that having more women professors and more women students in the male-heavy disciplines is more important than that current professors get to exercise their shallow or blinkered judgement. This response, of course, explicitly rejects my account of the nature and purpose of a university, for it proposes that

there is something more important to a university than academic values. And so the battle here must be fought on different, prior, grounds.

A second critical response is that shallow or blinkered academic judgement is bad judgement, bad *academic* judgement. The university would improve itself as an academic institution were it to constrain bad academic judgement, for that bad judgement is barring the gate to much rich and valuable inquiry.

Well, then, if that is right—that the professors are unable to see the value of pursuing certain topics, or pursuing them in certain ways—then those professors are making a mistake. The way academics deal with mistaken hypotheses is to dispute them, to seek to refute them. Their way is not to roll over them with policies and rules. The proper approach to take with regard to the professor whose judgement of academic worth is shallow or blinkered is to seek to deepen or widen his or her judgement.

It should give us pause, if it is true that women students who would prefer to study philosophy are studying sociology, say, because they cannot find at their university enough of the philosophy that interests them, or because they find few classes congenial. If offering courses in some area of interest would bring more students to our courses, then we should think to offer courses in that area, so long as it is academically sound to do so. And if what keeps us from seeing the academic soundness of doing so is a poor conception of academic soundness, then we should revise our conception.

Of course, no academic should ever side with an option he or she thinks other than best academically. That way lies the corruption of the university.

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