

Does it matter that your personal circumstances influence how seriously your knowledge is taken?

A ToK Prescribed Essay written by Mr. Haydock
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“We Hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”
US Declaration of Independence, 1776

"I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."
US pledge of Allegiance as originally adopted, 1892

On a cold Washington morning in January 2019, the 116th United States Congress began its session. On that day, 243 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence and 127 years after the adoption of the Pledge of Allegiance, 435 members of the House of Representatives and 33 of the 100 United States Senators were sworn into office. But for a nation founded upon the idea of equality and whose history tells the story of so many different people's struggle to achieve these ideals, laid out in the Nation's founding document and pledged to daily by millions of its citizens, the composition of that Congress strikes a strangely dissonant note. Despite representing 50.8% of the US population (Census Bureau 2018) women made up only 24% of the 116th Congress (Geiger et. al. 2019). Similarly, while non-white Americans represented 39.1% of the population (Census Bureau 2018) they made up only 22% of the new Congress (Geiger et. al. 2019). Sadly, what is true in politics is even more true in the private sector. In 2019 the share of women and minority representation on the boards of Fortune 500 companies stood at 34%, while this same group represents 69% of the population at large (Olson 2019). We are told that education is important to our advancement in life and that what we know is more important than who we are, but the reality of 21st century America is that your personal circumstances still influence how seriously your knowledge is taken. This fact continues to erode the American dream and sap the potential strength of our nation and can be seen not only in the composition of our Congress, but also in, the policies of some of our greatest artistic institutions, in the colleges and universities that are the center of American intellectual life, and even in the words of our current president.

Don Norman indicates in *The Design of Everyday Things* that “knowledge how - what psychologists call procedural knowledge - is the knowledge that enables a person to be a

skilled musician . . . [and] is largely subconscious, residing at the behavioral level of processing” (Norman 2013, 78). A musician’s knowledge can thus be measured by the quality of their performance, and so major symphony orchestras make every effort to screen and hire only the best - most knowledgeable - performers in their field. Or do they? Despite the fact that no one claims that musical talent is based on biological sex, symphony orchestras have historically been male dominated. In 1970, the “top five symphony orchestras in the United States had fewer than 5% women” (Rice 2013). Historically, this had always been the case, but when the status quo began to be questioned as a result of the women’s rights movement, and laws that were passed to prohibit hiring based on personal circumstances such as race and sex, orchestras had to adapt. By the 1970s, despite growing awareness and possible legal sanctions, the rigorous audition process for symphony orchestras continued to hire fewer women and more men. What did this mean? Ideally, an audition would reveal the best, most accomplished and knowledgeable musicians through a “survival of the best” process. Were women actually less knowledgeable musicians, or was something else at work? And if something else was at work, were American cultural institutions cheating their audiences out of the best performances possible because the most knowledgeable performers were not playing for them?

Beginning in the 1970s (with one notable exception in 1952), many symphony orchestras began to question how objective their objective audition processes actually were by conducting what came to be known as ‘blind auditions,’ which “involve[d] hiding the identity of the player from the jury” (Goldin and Rouse 2000). The goal was simple - to judge the quality of the music played (the musician’s procedural knowledge) in the absence of factors that might cause conscious or unconscious bias based on the personal characteristics or circumstances of the musicians auditioning. A study published in the American Economic Review in 2000 found that the blind audition process not only dramatically increased the number of women in symphony orchestras by 25% from 1970 to 1996, but also increased “by 50% the probability that women will be advanced from certain preliminary rounds and

increase[d] by severalfold the likelihood that women will be selected in the final round” (Goldin and Rouse 2000). Why the increase? A simple survey of the attitudes of male musicians from the early 1970s makes it clear, “many of the most renowned conductors have . . . asserted that female musicians are not the equal of male musicians. Claims abound in the world of music that ‘women have smaller techniques than men,’ ‘are more temperamental and more likely to demand special attention or treatment’, and that ‘the more women, the poorer the sound’” (Goldin and Rouse 2000). Despite gains, women today account for only 39.2% of the nation’s largest symphony orchestras. Additionally, performer compensation and who sits the principal chairs, something blind auditions can’t address, both still show a decided favoritism to men (Edgers 2018). In short, if you are a top caliber musician, the level of your success might have more to do with your personal circumstances than your actual musical knowledge.

Sadly what is true for musical knowledge is also true in colleges and universities. In an article for the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2010, UC Berkeley Professor Mary Ann Mason writes that while “it is a well established in the research on higher education that women are less likely to achieve tenure than men,” what is less well known is that this is true “far more often for married women with children.” In one high profile tenure denial case at Boston University in the 1980s, a female English professor fought for and won a discrimination case in part “because she had direct evidence that the university’s president at the time had told another woman enduring the tenure process, ‘ . . . your husband is a parachute, so why are you worried’” (Mason 2010). Family life is a rather common personal circumstance for members of our social species, and yet, common as it is, the fact that women get married and have children seems to be a more significant factor than their knowledge of their field when it comes to promotion and retention in American universities. A National Science Foundation survey found that “female scientists with children are 27 percent less likely to win tenure than male scientists” (Mason 2010). Does it matter that these scientists’ personal circumstances impact their career opportunities? Take a moment and think about the advances that are lost in the sciences by failing to retain quality scientists and teachers. How many breakthroughs

have not happened because we have such little tolerance for women who have to take time off to ensure the continuation of our species? But beyond the loss of knowledge, think about the number of young women in undergraduate science classes that will be denied a female role models. How many more women would be in the STEM fields if college-age women had a representative number of women professors to show them what they, too, could achieve?

It is tempting to claim that these examples, despite the statistical evidence supporting them, are outliers, that American society has come a long way since the time when people were judged not by what they knew or could do, but on the basis of their personal circumstances. Unfortunately, the presidential election in 2016 seems to suggest that this is not the case. In the spring of 2016 candidate Donald Trump attacked District Court Judge Gonzalo Curiel's decision to allow a class action complaint against Trump University to go forward. Trump lashed out at the judge saying that "I think he should recuse himself" because "He's of Mexican heritage and he's very proud of it" (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/27/politics/judge-curiel-trump-border-wall/index.html>). This attack was based solely on the judge's personal circumstances. Not on his experience. Not on his knowledge of the law. Not on his academic achievements. In a society that valued knowledge irrespective of personal circumstances, this would have been the end of Trump's presidential campaign. Instead, the man who suggested a Mexican judge was not qualified to sit in judgment of him now sits in the Oval Office.

So does it matter if your personal circumstances influence how seriously your knowledge is taken? Yes, but only if you want to hear the best music when you attend the symphony, be taught by the most qualified professors and wish to continue living in a pluralistic democracy founded on the 243 year old words of the Declaration of Independence which insist that what you know is more important than who you are.

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