

Public Ethics Radio

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Episode 16, Samantha Brennan on Microinequalities

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MATT PETERSON: Hello, and welcome back to Public Ethics Radio. I'm Matt Peterson.

In Australia, where much of this podcast is recorded, Julia Gillard is the country's first female prime minister. In the U.S., Hillary Clinton set a precedent in 2008 with her campaign to become the first female president, and is now the first female secretary of state. In both these countries, and throughout the West, formal barriers to discrimination against women and other minorities were largely abolished decades ago. And in that formal way, officially sanctioned discrimination is largely a thing of the past.

And yet, inequality is a fact of life for women throughout their economic, social and political lives. Today on Public Ethics Radio, we discuss those pervasive inequalities for women, in the form of what Samantha Brennan calls microinequalities.

Samantha Brennan is a professor of political philosophy at the University of Western Ontario. She spoke to our host, Christian Barry, in Canberra.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: Samantha Brennan, welcome to Public Ethics Radio.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Thank you. And thank you for having me.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: Samantha, in the West at least, it seems that there are very few, if any, formal obstacles or formal barriers to participation in labor markets and in access to services and all sorts of other things that are faced by women, so that women, on the face of it at least, seem to be treated no differently than men. Nevertheless, there seem to be a lot of studies, both in social-psychological research and otherwise, that suggest that there are all sorts of inequalities between women and men that persist. And also of course there are lots of reports that are being released about inequalities between men and women in just about every area of professional life.

So I just wanted to start by asking how much of an issue is this? How important are these sorts of inequalities that remain, and whether they should be an area of priority for Western liberal feminists.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: So I think what's happened is we're in a situation in which, as you said, there aren't formal barriers anymore to women's equality. The last remaining ones are sort of women in combat, and that's gone. And women are participating in higher education at rates equal to or more than equal to men. At my university, women make up about 60 percent of the student population, and so there aren't educational barriers.

Yet we still look at certain key fields and say why aren't we... You know, 20 percent of CEOs, women. Twenty percent of elected public officials, woman. That's odd, given—we've got these incredibly well-educated, under—underrepresented part of the population. It's both, I think, hurting us as a society, and I think it's also a site of injustice. And so we're looking at explanations about why that's so, given the lack of formal barriers.

And I was drawn initially to work by Mary Rowe, who was hired at MIT to discuss why they're—what are of the barriers facing women and minorities, and she said she expected to find big problems. But she didn't find any big problems. What she found were a whole bunch of little problems that together made a tremendous difference.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: So could you give an example of some of these little problems?

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Some of them are things that seem like each one are when you bring it up, you're just whining, it's just trivial. I mean, MIT's had some big ones. Office space being the most recent one. Lab space, you just quantify lab space; women have less lab space than do men. But even simple things like socializing outside the workplace. If you imagine things that are hard to make rules about and hard to control.

Performance evaluations are one of the ones that she talked about, where gender judgments were creeping in. It's hard to do those anonymously. You're not going to do that with performance evaluations. And yet gender plays a huge role in performance evaluation. If you ask men and women to evaluate CVs, and you put different gender names of the CVs, you get different judgments. And that's consistent whether or not you ask women to do the evaluating. So it's not one of the things where there are evil, awful sexist men and virtuous women; we just blame the guys for the problem. This is all of our problem.

So I think what's challenging about this collection of problems is that they're hard to formalize, so it's hard for justice to think, well, you think, what should the rules be? You know, I'm a liberal and a Kantian, so I think, "Well, let's make some rules." But these are ones where we're getting some horrible, I think, some pretty bad results from small things going wrong that add up over time.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: So you mentioned controllability, and formal rules.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Right.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: So they certainly seem to be difficult to control in form of formal rules at least in some cases—we can come back to that. But are these things that are self-controllable? That is, certainly it doesn't seem that in many cases these are intended biases. They seem rather to be unintentional biases, but are these not the sorts of issues where as they become more widely known and recognized can be avoided to some degree? Or is there something about them that resists that sort of . . .

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Well the one thing they're resist—some of them are resistant to is just that people think that if they thought hard enough about it, they could make the bias go away. And it turns out, sadly, although I'd like it to be true, that's not true. You can't just—philosophers love to think that if we just, that we're very rational and that if we just think very hard and make a problem go away. So the problem of implicit bias is resistant to that kind of solution.

But there are things that work. So, having explicit performance criteria spelled out in advance, that makes a difference. Where we can, doing things anonymously. We can't do that with performance evaluation, but you can do it with grading. There's absolutely no reason anyone should read the literature, know the literature on implicit bias in grading and ever grade an essay with a student's name attached to it ever again. There's no need of it.

So in some cases we can make it go away. In other cases we have research showing that things like taking time pressure off makes a difference. So that if we're forced into make—forced into making quick decisions, we rely on heuristics that are often the source of implicit bias. If we're given more time, and we have explicit criteria, we do a better job. So there is social science research on what makes us do a better job, and what makes us do a worse job. And so while we can't just think the problem away [SNAPS], we can do our research and adopt methods that will lead us to making better decisions.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: So one of things that you mention in some of your writings is you talk about different types of inequalities. And obviously inequalities are of all sorts of things. They're in different spaces, of different magnitudes, and of different moral importance. And some of the ones we've been discussing are surely of some moral importance—

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Right.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: —that is, it seems to be problematic if there's systematic bias against women in some area of research—

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Mm hm.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: —even if all of those researchers are pretty well-off. Some of the other cases you mentioned, are sort of much more small-scale. So some things about people getting served more quickly in coffee shops if they're young, white, good-looking men, as opposed to they're women or minority groups. I mean, it's not that those things

are insignificant, but on the other hand, they're not sort of a cause for major sort of social protest.

So, to motivate our concern about inequalities of these various types, it would be interesting to see what you thought about how they're related to one another. That is, are they related? Is there strong causal influence that builds up from these very small inequalities to these more insignificant ones? Or are we really operating in different spaces?

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Well, the example that you mentioned, this one that I love, it's the coffee shop example where a Boston—of course, it's an economist, there's great feminists working in economics—the economics these days who went out and timed how long people waited for coffee and discovered that women, regardless of their order, she—they, of course, took account of the women ordering fancier coffee beverages—that women take 20 seconds longer on average to get coffee than do the male customers. And likewise for all the variables we can imagine.

But you're right, it would be odd. You'd never get a protest movement, you know, "Give us our coffee now! When do we want it? The same time as the guys get it!" You know, that would be a trivial protest movement. But how is it connected to the larger stuff? I think it's connected to the larger stuff in two different ways. It's informed by the same prejudices, I think, that give rise to the judgments that are significant.

So I think if we see how widespread it is, we should stop thinking of ourselves as special or different than other people, and recognize that the kinds of judgments we're making, you know, people are making these decisions in different realms. And the police officer who is more likely to pull over a black driver and the coffee-shop person who takes longer to give coffee to the black patron, that's not a different thing at work, I suspect. What you have are the same sorts of biases at work in a bunch of different realms, some of which are important and some of which are not.

The other way in which they're connected is that although each one is trivial, or a whole bunch of them are trivial—the other examples I give are women paying more for dry cleaning, paying more for haircuts. There's a bunch of things that just have a female price tag attached. I often when I'm doing dry cleaning, try to throw my shirts in with my husbands'. They'll say "That's a woman's blouse." How can you tell the difference? And they'll say, "It's buttoned a different way." That makes it cost more to dry clean? I don't get it. Or a woman who wants just an inch cut off the bottom of her hair paying more than a man who wants a fairly complicated haircut.

Those are trivial. But if all of your life is like that. If you have, you know, 40—I forget what the exact figure is—but 40 minutes less leisure time a day, you do an hour more work around the home a week, it starts to add up. And so although each example might be trivial in the life of somebody who leads an otherwise well-off, privileged life, you can look at some pretty substantial inequalities over time.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: Yeah, well, one of the things that that sort of brings out is that there are different ways of looking at the gravity of an injustice.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Right.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: And of course on one scale, the gravity of injustice has to do with sort of its consequences, how well off the victim is—

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Mm hm.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: —relative to others can we say that they have a good life. On the other hand, there's a sense in which there's an expressive component—

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Right.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: —to these sorts of inequalities. That it seems problematic to dismiss. Do you think that that's an important part—an important issue with respect to women?

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Right, it's connected to issues of respect and group respect. And whether or not you think you're being singled out because of a characteristic you have no control over, that can be hurtful even if it's just quite small.

One of the examples I've talked about is Claudia Card talking about when she was an undergraduate, being allowed to use the Harvard library. So she was allowed to take classes there, but not allowed to use the library. Women had to ask male students to get books for them. And she said, "Look, I was at—that's not a huge problem, because I could just get someone else to get the books for me, and I was allowed to attend Harvard. I was pretty privileged."

I think that sort of misses the full impact of what's wrong with that action. It's not just wrong because of its results. It's wrong because it says "You don't belong here. You're not a full—you're not a full citizen, you're not a full member of our society."

CHRISTIAN BARRY: You mentioned Claudia Card, and I know that some of her work is quite critical of what she sort of perceives as sort of an overemphasis in Western feminist work on ironing out these types of inequalities, addressing these sorts of inequalities. Partly because she thinks on the global scale, they're not that important, even with respect to—in relatively wealthy societies, there are other sorts of issues, sorts of inequalities and its effects which are graver.

And then also more generally, globally. If we actually compare these types of injustices with global injustices, it seems absurd to be using so much resources intellectual and otherwise, political resources, in addressing these inequalities, and others. Do you think that's a plausible critique? Or do you think it's a bit more complex than that?

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: I think it's a bit more complex than that. I think Claudia Card talks about those things in terms of evils. I think she's right that some of the things she talks about as evils are more important than some of the things she talks about as inequalities. But wrong that evils always trump inequalities. And wrong that there's no connection between the evils and the inequalities.

She has a way of dividing it up that makes it sound as if they're a separate phenomenon. I don't think that they are. I actually think in some cases we do our best at combating the evils by focusing on the inequalities.

She's not the only feminist who's been critical of inequality. I think also Iris Young has talked about oppression versus inequality and that liberal political theory has focused far too much on things that can be distributed and redistributed, and not enough on oppression. And not enough on political power. And so they're both critics of this focus, feminist focus on inequality.

And I think they're right that North American feminism in particular can seem as if it's concerned with getting women an equal share of what's already a pretty rich pie. But I do sometimes think feminists express our views in a way that lends itself to that misinterpretation. But in fact I think that the evils and the inequalities are related and connected in a variety of ways.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: We're going to take a short break. And we'll be back with more with Samantha Brennan on Public Ethics Radio.

MATT PETERSON: This is Public Ethics Radio.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: So, one of the things that occurs to me in your last response is this idea that there is this problem that we shouldn't be sort of narcissistic in a way in our thinking about justice. But on the other hand, we should not discount unduly the significance of what appear to be small injustices, with which we happen to have a certain type of familiarity. But I was just curious if you thought that this was an issue of maldistribution of resources in terms of sort of promoting justice in modern feminist thinking and activism.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Yeah. Certainly there's a question of what areas in life feminists should give priority to. And I don't disagree with some of the areas that Card thinks are the most important. So, I think, we should care a lot about the situation of women who live in poverty, women who live lives in violence, women who have none of the protections that I do, for example. For sure.

Does that mean that I should then drop everything I normally do and focus on activities that would benefit women in those groups or try to end those injustices?

The first is that we all have responsibilities that attach to our role. So some of the workplace stuff that I talked about isn't separate from the job that I have as a philosopher,

as a member of an academic department. So it's not that I do my nine-to-five job and then say, "What does justice ask of me?" and then I pick projects on which to work.

Rather, I think about justice in part as a workplace ethics problem, and so some of these questions that I talked about in terms of performance evaluation and inclusion and microinequities are really workplace responsibilities. They're ones that aren't something special that I do after I—not that philosophers ever punch out—but I punch out and go home. They're ones that should weigh on me all the time doing my job.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: So it's interesting, it's sort of the idea of you have certain associative duties, special associate duties with respect to injustices that you can sort of see yourself as being—

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: I'm causing!

CHRISTIAN BARRY: Deeply implicated in. Yeah. Yeah.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: They're not ones that I'm just taking on as an extra project. If I'm chairing an appointments committee meeting, which I did as chair of my department for eight years, it's my moral responsibility to inform my colleagues and to raise some of the questions we've talked about. That's not a separate—it's not separate from the work that I normally do.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: Looking sort of prospectively at the issue of microinequalities, I wanted—one of the things you suggest is how difficult they are. They're difficult both from the point of view of setting up institutional arrangements that can guard against them, although you mentioned a few cases—

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Mm hm.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: —where, at least awareness about them can be raised by doing audits of hiring decisions over a certain period in a certain place, and that sort of thing. And you also talked about certain routine, sort of mechanical things that you can adopt in your particular role, say, as a teacher, as a grader of essays.

But I wanted to ask of you if you could think of cases where there have been sort of microinequalities that have been effectively addressed, and effectively addressed in a way that might have had further dynamic effects which were positive. And insofar as such examples are not readily available, if you could suggest different ways in which you imagine those different interventions might actually be, be possible.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Actually, some science journals are probably the best example. There's been a project in philosophy to track admissions of, submissions by women and percent of papers that are accepted and published by women. And no surprise, I guess, philosophy journals, some, do not do particularly well. And philosophy

journals—philosophy is an oddball discipline in that a bunch of our journals still don't do anonymous review. So papers are going to the referee with the author's name attached.

As an aside, if I was going to name my children now—really, I'm already done, which is too bad—having read all the stuff on implicit bias, I would give them gender-neutral names. But I was too late for that. And there are lots of women I know who actually publish under a gender-neutral version of their name. There's another philosopher with my name who publishes under Sam. And I think, "Why didn't I think of that?" But I started publishing before any of that.

So some science journals took the same evidence and worried about anonymous review, and decided—and I like scientists because they say, "Well, we don't believe it makes a difference, but, hey, let's run a test." So they did anonymous review for a while, and lo and behold the percent of accepted papers by women increased. And they said—this is what I like about scientists—"Well, we were wrong! We're going to change our practice." And almost all science journals are anonymous. And some philosophy journals are still not.

That's a simple thing that has made a difference in some fields. It could make a difference in ours. And they ought to be anonymous all the way down. I mean, I've worked for—

CHRISTIAN BARRY: You mean no prescreening by the editor.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: I've... sat as an editor on the Canadian Journal of Philosophy, for the Canadian Journal of Philosophy. And this will date me, but we used to receive the paper anonymized, and the author's name in a little tiny envelope. In later years, we got it as a separate email attachment, the author's name. And so we had to decide whether or not the paper went to review. And you only opened the author's name envelope after you'd made your decision. Or you only opened the email with the author's name after you made your decision. And you did that so you didn't send the paper to the author to be refereed or to any of the author's, you know, close colleagues. And I think that worked well, but I was surprised—and I think that was, as I say—as you can tell by the envelope reference, many years ago.

But we've, you know, the way's CJOP has always worked. I was surprised to discover that other journals don't do that. And so so-called desk rejection, by the editor—why do we think editors are special about implicit bias? There's no reason to think they are. They shouldn't know the author's name either.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: Since we're on the topic of philosophy, one thing that, in various reports that I've seen, is that it notoriously—does notoriously poorly in gender terms compared other disciplines, particularly in the humanities. And I just wanted to get your sense of what you think explains that, because the types of implicit biases that you mentioned seem to run through all fields.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Mm hm.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: It doesn't seem to be specific to philosophy, certainly, although there may be certain holdover practices or old-fashioned practices.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Right, there's all these small explanations, each one of which can't be the right complete explanation, because some other discipline shares most of those features. And I don't think there is one big explanation.

Louise Anthony has a great phrase, I think it's the title of her paper on the subject, called "Perfect Storm." Which is that each one of these is a small piece of the puzzle. And together creates a perfect storm. There isn't one single explanation. Our discipline is hostile to applied work. Yes, I think that hurts women. Our discipline is hostile to—some parts of our discipline are particularly not friendly to feminist philosophy. I think that makes a difference. But each one of those is just a small part of the story. I don't think there is one big answer that explains the problem.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: We're going to take another short break, and we'll be back with more on microinequalities with Samantha Brennan.

MATT PETERSON: You're listening to Public Ethics Radio. Christian Barry is speaking to Professor Samantha Brennan, of the University of Western Ontario.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: So one of the other things that you mentioned, just in the household, that feminists of course have famously brought to the attention, is what might be considered sort of microinequalities even within the household—

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Sure.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: —and their effects, which ties in with another interest I know that you have, which is in terms of care for children. And one of the ways in which it seems inequalities in the distribution of household responsibilities, it gets brought out or magnified when it comes to children, and how if at all you thought that related to this more general issue of these microinequities.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: I think it relates in that it's an area which results from, again, there's no one big explanation. There's a whole bunch of small explanations and a whole bunch of decisions that individually might be rational and may, you know, good decisions, but we don't like the result. And so lots of small things, again, there turn out to make a difference.

I did a career day with my daughter's Girl Guide group. And I think they were probably at that point about age 10 and 11. And I thought it would be good to have a philosopher there, because it was—it gives some, an interesting career choice for the young Girl Guides, so I went in.

I was shocked at how many of the Girl Guides asked me about balancing work and the family. And caring for children. And what struck me then was that all these little Girl Guides are at 10 and 11 already thinking that they should choose a career that will allow them to balance work and the family.

And do little boys at 10 and 11 are thinking about balancing and juggling work and the family? No. But if we've got a whole bunch of girls thinking that they should, and a whole bunch of boy who never think about it, and then by and large the boys and the girls get together and then make decisions, and the girls will have chosen the flexible careers that will allow them to take time off. And surprise, the choice that's made is that the bulk of the work will fall to the female member of the couple. But that's a decision that started way back when.

And so I think it's like the inequities problem in that we have some rather large differences, some rather large inequalities, but the pieces of the puzzle that make that up—again, you've got—I'm interested in the problems in which people who have good intentions have bad results. So I'm interested in philosophers who are determined to have equal representation of men and women in their discipline, but don't manage it. I'm interested in the problem of young men and young women who start out in egalitarian relationships, and end up with an unequal division of work in the home.

How does this happen? What are the small steps along the way? And how can we fix it? And so there's no—I don't think there is one big answer in each scenario or situation. There are people with good intentions and then bad results. And then we need to look at what happened along the way.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: Well, one of the really interesting things about this problem, it kind of recalls some of the things that Rawls says about the tendency of unregulated markets—

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Right. Yeah, yeah.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: or just ordinary, seemingly morally innocent interactions to sort of—

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Mm hm.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: —militate away from justice, and the importance of having social arrangements that sort of keep an even keel and are sort of constantly righting or regulating these sorts of things. But one of the interesting things about the two problems that you've just mentioned is that these are areas where, which seem to resist regulation of, in a way that other types of social injustice can be, it seems to be—it's difficult politically to be, but can be seen to be readily regulated.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Yeah, I think we have to come at it in different directions. So some people, upon hearing about some of these problems, think the solution has to be totally individual. And I don't—I think that's doomed.

I think there's a good book by an economist, Rhona Mahony directed at young women, advising them to educate up and marry down. So that when you make decisions in the family, you'll end up more—she sort of basically talks about how women typically, on average, they marry a partner who is older, more educated, makes more money, and is physically larger. That would be on average. And then say, “Wow, I'm in an inegalitarian relationship! How did that happen?” Well, maybe we should think about partner selection.

She says there are lots of perfectly acceptable underemployed musicians, philosophers out there. Who would be, you've got your full-time, successful career, who'd be happy to take care of the children and be supported. You should think about them as acceptable mates.

But—but she looked at the class of women graduating with Stanford MBAs, who I think at that point were on average earned \$125,000 a year as their starting salary, and they almost all married men who made more. She says we don't need to do that. They—if you're marrying a man who makes more, and then you make the efficient family choice about who's going to take time off, it'll be the lower-income-earning partner, and that'll be you, the Harvard MBA. But it doesn't need to have to be that way. You don't have to marry someone who makes more than you. Anyway.

So some of the solutions I think are individual. But some of them are best in groups. So in the workplace, I think we can look at places that have had success in practices that make a difference. We can pay attention, as we ought to, at the social-science literature on these problems. And come up with some local solutions and try things out. Be a bit more humble about—we should be more epistemically humble. Recognize that we make mistakes, especially when we have to make decisions quickly, and think about how we might make them differently.

In the family, I think there's room for government policy. Whether or not that's in terms of good childcare availability, whether or not that's in Canada, interestingly, partners can split time off. But I think it's in Sweden where the men have to take it or lose it. I think that makes a difference. Or unlikely—again, there are a variety of solutions you can think about, some that are individual, and some that are the level of policy.

CHRISTIAN BARRY: Samantha Brennan, thanks very much for joining us on Public Ethics Radio.

SAMANTHA BRENNAN: Thank you. Thank you.

MATT PETERSON: Thanks for listening to Public Ethics Radio. The show is produced by me, Matt Peterson, and Barbara Clare. Christian Barry is our host. The show is

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