

10/19/2016

## Dialogues on Disability: Shelley Tremain Interviews Cecilea Mun

*Hello, I'm Shelley Tremain and I'd like to welcome you to the nineteenth installment of Dialogues on Disability, the series of interviews that I am conducting with disabled philosophers and post here on the third Wednesday of each month. The series is designed to provide a public venue for discussion with disabled philosophers about a range of topics, including their philosophical work on disability; the place of philosophy of disability vis-à-vis the discipline and profession; their experiences of institutional discrimination and personal prejudice in philosophy, in particular, and in academia, more generally; resistance to ableism; accessibility; and anti-oppressive pedagogy.*

*My guest today is Cecilea Mun. Cecilea is a philosopher of emotion, currently at work on a manuscript entitled Interdisciplinary Foundations for the Science of Emotion: Unification Without Consilience. She is also putting together a proposal for an anthology entitled Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Shame: Theory, Method, Norms, Cultures, and Politics, for which she seeks a publisher, and will soon launch the Journal of Philosophy of Emotion, along with its associated Society for Philosophy of Emotion. Cecilea is seeking a full-time academic position that supports her research and currently works as a full-time adjunct at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, while spending quality time with her family.*

*Welcome to Dialogues on Disability, Cecilea! You are a first-generation U.S. citizen and first-generation university graduate. Please tell us about your personal and educational background, as well as why you were motivated to study philosophy and, ultimately, become a professional philosopher.*

Hello, Shelley and Everyone. Thank you for this opportunity to share my experiences.

My father first visited the United States through a partnership between the U.S. Army and the Korean Army, eventually emigrating to the U.S. with my mother and older sister. Like many of us, he had various jobs, eventually landing a position with McDonald Douglas/Hughes Helicopters. My mother worked as a seamstress, starting off with piecework at home. She received something like twenty cents for each article of clothing that she sewed, but the job allowed her to be at home in order to take care of us when we were kids. She was eventually employed by the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino, in their costuming/uniform department.

My life as a first-generation U.S. citizen and university graduate echoes the narratives that reflect the lives of others like me. But, as the youngest of three, with about eleven years in age difference between my older sister and myself, my experiences were very different from my sister's. Like most immigrants, my parents worked very hard throughout their lives and they were very frugal with their money, trying to make sure that they used their money wisely. So my sister had a more difficult childhood than I did. I did not grow up under conditions of wealth and privilege, but my parents had more resources by the time I was born than when my older sister was growing up.

In many ways, I owe a lot of thanks to my older sister for the kind of person that I am today. My sister was the first person in our family to earn a B.A. and, at the time, my parents did not realize the value of an Ivy-League education. So my sister had to rebel against my father in order to take advantage of her opportunity to go to Yale, even with a full ride. Things were quite difficult for her as a student because she had to pay for anything that wasn't covered by her scholarship.

Despite her difficulties, what my sister learned, she brought back to us and shared with us. She was the person who introduced us to alternative cultures and experiences. She was the person who took me to my first play, musical, and art museum, and introduced me to many non-Korean, non-American foods. I love the arts and am a "foodie" because of her influence. My parents were unable to share these kinds of experiences with us, mostly because their experiences were limited and they did not have a lot of free time; they were doing their best to provide the "necessities" of life. Given the elitist culture of academia, the experiences that my sister shared with us were invaluable.

As a side note, I think academia can retain the appreciation of culture as part of its ethos without being elitist about it. Rather than use the appreciation of culture as a weapon of marginalization—to mark those who are "in" and those who are "out"; those "in the know" and those "not in the know"—we can use the appreciation of culture as a way to build bridges across communities, even across other areas of the discipline and across other disciplines. What's important, I think, is that one has the appropriate intention—simply the desire to share valuable experiences with others as a way to establish a community.

Of the three children in my family, I was the one that people would never have guessed would eventually become an academic (unless they knew me as a Lincoln-Douglas debater). Both my brother and my sister were high school valedictorians, both are Yale graduates, and my brother is also a Harvard graduate. My sister was the first in our family to earn a B.A. My brother was the

first in our family to earn a M.A. Although I am the first in our family to earn a Ph.D., in contrast with my siblings, I was considered the “social butterfly” of the family and “not very studious.” My intelligence was readily acknowledged, but that didn’t mean much in my family since everyone else was intelligent.

As a child, unbeknownst to me, I was enrolled in the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program. I was never informed about the program, why I was in it, and that I was tested for it. I didn’t find out until my junior or senior year of high school, when my high school guidance counsellor called me into his office and asked me why, given that I had such a high I.Q., my grades were not that great. Only then, did I find out that I had scored an I.Q. of 164 at the time of my testing. I had no answer at the time, but it angers me sometimes when I think about the fact that I was not fully informed, despite the fact that I was a child.

I might have been more motivated to do well in school if I had known, not simply that I was intelligent, but that I was exceptionally so. Perhaps my disability would not have gone undetected until I became an adult. All that I knew as a child was that, unlike other students, I had “lessons”—the I.Q. assessments—outside of class and additional assignments that I had to complete in class. I was also enrolled in honors courses whenever the option was available, except during my senior year at Bishop Gorman high school, due to my unimpressive G.P.A.

Although I was not a very remarkable student at Gorman, I was an outstanding Lincoln-Douglas debater. It was through speech and debate that I met some of the most kindred of spirits that I have known in my life. I was also introduced to philosophy, and fell in love with researching, writing argumentative papers, debating, public speaking, and teaching. I taught myself Lincoln-Douglas debate and eventually, during my junior and senior years, taught new team members.

I also began to develop my leadership skills at this time. I was vice president of the speech and debate team in my junior year and president in my senior year, during which time our team was pretty successful. Our team was one of a few teams that almost always placed at any local tournament. We also did very well in out-of-state tournaments, including one at Stanford and one ASU. It was during my speech and debate years that I decided to become a philosopher. I had thought about what kind of profession would allow me to pursue the kinds of activities that I did as a Lincoln-Douglas debater. Philosophy was my answer.

One might say that I studied philosophy for around twenty years, taking into account my speech and debate years in high school; but, I was actually introduced to my first philosophical problem around the age of five or so when my father showed me a picture of the old woman/young woman illusion and asked me what

I saw. Interestingly enough, my answer became the basis of a section in my dissertation, though the section was later edited out because at least one committee member thought my point was too orthogonal to my dissertation's primary aims.

*Over the past year, you have worked diligently to introduce a new online, open-access philosophy journal, the Journal of Philosophy of Emotions (JPE). What sorts of material do you hope to publish in it, and from whom? Why will this journal be an important addition to the range of journals already available? That is, what gap in the literature do you think that this journal fills?*

Currently, there are several psychological and interdisciplinary journals dedicated to publishing work on emotion and, recently, a journal that focuses on publishing work on the social-historical aspects of emotion was introduced. When I first envisaged the *JPE*, there was no journal that published work on the broad range of issues within the philosophy of emotion, including interests and concerns within metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, logic, philosophy of science, ethics, philosophies of marginalization, moral psychology, experimental philosophy, etc., as well as interests outside the discipline of philosophy, such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, and the arts.

In other words, the *JPE* aims to publish high-quality manuscripts that address the questions and problems in the philosophy of emotion, strictly speaking, and that demonstrate how issues in the philosophy of emotion are relevant to other areas in the discipline and other disciplines, and vice versa. So, rather than "filling a gap in the literature," I see the *JPE* as providing a space where interdisciplinary pursuits in the philosophy of emotion can flourish.

*I think some readers and listeners might be interested to know how one initiates a new philosophy journal. What has brought you to the point at which you will circulate the journal's first call for papers this month?*

During my years as a graduate student, I noticed that although a lot of work was produced in the area of philosophy of emotion, there was no journal dedicated to this area. That was when I had the initial idea for a journal. At the time, however, I didn't have the resources or experience to pursue the idea any further. As I gained more experience as an academic, in general, and in publishing, in particular, I decided that I had what was needed to start a journal.

So, I took a very business-oriented approach to the whole process. I conducted a market survey to gauge interest in the *JPE*. I enlisted the support of other scholars, which led to the establishment of the Society for Philosophy of Emotion; I researched other journals to use as models, spoke to publishers, and spent a lot of time developing it. (Thank you, by the way, for your support!)

I was also motivated by my intention to fulfill what I saw to be a need within the academic publishing industry in philosophy. This intention inspired me to not only launch the *JPE*, but to also employ the *JPE*'s fully transparent, cooperative, open-review (FTCOR) process. Although all the articles and meditations that it publishes will undergo the FTCOR process, we plan to have a symposium in our inaugural issue for prominent scholars who work in the area of philosophy of emotion—primarily or as a related area—to share their thoughts about a range of ideas, including philosophy of emotion as an area of research, interdisciplinarity in philosophy of emotion, and their vision for the future of philosophy of emotion. Currently, seven accomplished scholars have made a commitment to contribute to the symposium and we hope to add a few more.

*It seems as if it would be a monumental feat for one person to initiate, develop, and launch the sort of well-organized and well-respected philosophy journal that the Journal of Philosophy of Emotion promises to be. You feel that your education and career history have, in some ways, been shaped by a “mismatch” (to use your term) between what you seem like “on paper,” on the one side, and that of which you are capable, on the other. How would you describe this mismatch and to what do you attribute it?*

Thank you for the compliment, and yes, starting a new academic journal is not an easy task. I could not have done it without the help and support of my editorial assistants (especially Kalahan Stoker, who has worked with me from the initiation of the project) associate editors, and the Society for Philosophy of Emotion. I don't have any regrets and I will do my best to help fulfill its aims; however, starting a journal from scratch is not something that I would recommend to anyone, although I wouldn't necessarily stop anyone from doing so.

In regard to the mismatch between my G.P.A. and my abilities, due to my A.D.D., and the fact that I was not diagnosed until I became an adult, there is a mismatch in my academic history between what I seem like “on paper,” that is, my grades and what I am capable of. Nowadays, this discrepancy might have indicated to some people that I have a learning disability, but back in the day, there was—especially on the West coast—very little talk of A.D.D.

For those who are not aware of what A.D.D. is, I should explain that it's not simply a deficit in attention or focus. Rather, the underlying difficulty is a deficit in "executive control," which is involved in focus, attention, impulse control, and general decision-making. There are motivational issues as well. In regard to the mismatch between what I "looked like on paper" and what I am capable of, I believe the motivational issue was a significant factor.

For people with A.D.D., it is difficult to complete a task or project if they are not appropriately motivated to do so. I realize that this can be true for people in general, just as it is true that people in general can get depressed; but, like depression, for people with A.D.D., the circumstances are heightened: sometimes it is almost impossible to complete a task if we are not interested in it or it is not challenging in some way. This factor presented a problem for me as a student because I found it difficult to motivate myself to complete my schoolwork. Unless some particular subject matter really caught my interest, I waited till the last minute to complete projects, or I purposely challenged myself. For example, while I got a C (I believe) in my Advanced Placement (AP) History course, I scored a four on my AP History exam. My brother took the same course before me and had done very well; so, I felt like I had a reputation to live up to.

My parents also had a difficult time figuring out how to properly motivate me. They didn't realize that what I required was a really good reason to do something. This is pretty much the case with everything I do except when I decide that I don't, such as occasions when I am ambivalent about something or when I allow myself to be impulsive just to remind myself that, yes, I do have freewill (à la Kant). Simply getting good grades was not a good enough reason for me when I was in high school.

By the time I figured out my own good reason to get good grades—namely, to be a professional philosopher—it was a bit too late. So, after high school, I did what I could, given my unimpressive G.P.A., to pursue a Ph.D. in philosophy: I attended my local university, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, at which I earned a B.A. in philosophy and a M.A. in Ethics and Policy Studies. I then moved on to Arizona State University, where I earned a M.A. and a Ph.D. in philosophy. My A.D.D. may explain not only my unimpressive academic history on paper, but also my broadly ranging capacities and ability to quickly adapt or respond to a variety of circumstances. Apart from the effects of my A.D.D. on my reading and writing when left untreated, it's difficult for me to pry apart my A.D.D., my intelligence, and my passion for philosophy.

I *am*—and I know this sounds cliché—a philosopher. *Being* a philosopher is not something that I do only part of the time, after which time I go home and do something else. I became a philosopher because it allows me to be myself, to my fullest potential; and it can provide me with an environment in which I can feel “normal.” To me, being a philosopher is not necessarily about what theories and facts one knows; it’s about how one thinks.

I can’t help but find the world and people interesting. I can’t help but want to know more and to solve problems. I have a need to systematize, organize, and tie off loose ends in order to understand things and remember them. I also enjoy thinking about processes, possibilities, and thinking at various levels of abstraction. These are some of the reasons why my dissertation was on the foundations of interdisciplinary research for the science of emotion, and also why, if I were to say that I had one area of specialization, it would be the philosophy of emotion. Both interdisciplinary research and the philosophy of emotion give me the freedom that I need to explore, make sense of, teach, and contribute to solving various problems. All of this might also be the reason why I took what some might believe to be a considerable amount of time to complete my Ph.D.

At this point, however, I think I’ve done enough to almost make up for what I did not do when I was younger due to the fact that my A.D.D. went undetected and untreated. So, I think that although my A.D.D. has shaped my career history, it will cease to significantly influence my future career trajectory, especially since my disability has been identified. I was also advised by a very prominent philosopher that search committees focus more on who one’s advisers were, what one has accomplished besides earning one’s degree, and one’s demonstrated potential for research, rather than on one’s G.P.A. or the institution at which one’s degree was conferred.

*How must societal, institutional, professional, and philosophical practices and policies be adjusted to enable others like you to flourish as professional philosophers?*

This is a really difficult question because there are many things that ought to be changed and so many things that need to be considered. So I’ll preface my response with the qualification that it is from a limited perspective, given my status as an early-career, junior philosopher.

First, I think it’s important to acknowledge that regardless of our discipline’s and academia’s goal of diversification, professional academics constitute an exclusive

community. Not everyone can do what professional academics do, and not everyone wants to or should want to. This is one reason why professional academics belong to “disciplines” (to be contrasted with the “institutions” with which we are affiliated). It takes years of study and practice to succeed in any academic discipline. Like all other work, it is mentally and physically exhausting to do our work well. Not everyone will be able to perform in such a way that will allow them to flourish as professional academics in their chosen discipline. This does not lessen one’s value as a person nor afford anyone the right to treat someone with less respect. It is simply a reason that one ought to take into consideration when deciding whether or not a professional life as an academic is one that would make them happy.

Some may be happier as lawyers, stay-at-home parents, business professionals, construction workers, artists, etc. Such professions are also mentally and physically exhausting, and not everyone will be able to perform in these professions as well in such a way that will allow them to flourish. This is one reason why a professional academic does not have less or more worth than someone who is not an academic. Furthermore, there are many reasons that explain why some people choose an alternative path after pursuing an academic profession, and we have no right or authority to judge them for doing so.

Second, we need to acknowledge that the exclusivity of academia is not in itself a factor when addressing the problem of diversifying academia. Two related problems are the implicit biases that have been surreptitiously at work and the elitist attitude to which various academics believe that they are entitled simply as a consequence of academia’s exclusivity, ranking system, and their place in both, as well as what they take as good indicators of a successful academic—for example, one’s institutional affiliation or one’s rank. It is possible for an exclusive community to employ a ranking system without also committing acts of recognitional injustice. It is possible to equally value each member of a community without also assuming that each member should have an equal share of responsibilities, that each member should have an equal amount of authority in a community’s decision-making process, or that each member ought to produce the same quality of work although every member ought to try to achieve their best.

Third, in terms of establishing academic ranks, I believe institutions should offer the option of a fully transparent, open-tenure review to their tenure candidates, and that review committees ought to be constituted by members who have good working knowledge of both the tenure candidate’s work and the area within which they work. I also believe that institutions should give equal weight to the balance of the quality and number of a candidate’s publication and a candidate’s academic

service. Due to my A.D.D., I will never be as prolific as some philosophers; however, I can ensure that the quality of what I can and do produce, or what I contribute in terms of academic service, can compete with some of the best.

Fourth, I believe it's important for everyone to recognize that imperfection does not diminish the value of one's contribution; and no one is in fact perfect. This fact is readily acknowledged for nondisabled white male academics by their fellow academics, by staff members, and students; however, it is rarely, if ever, extended to disabled, minority professors, especially when one's disability is not outwardly visible.

I now make it a point to tell my students about my disability and I believe doing so has helped; but, for various reasons, including considerations of privacy, neither I, nor anyone else in my situation, should be compelled to do so in order to receive the kind of understanding that my students who are aware of my disability have given me, understanding that white male professors are typically given from the start. Regardless of my disability, if I am standing there in front of you, teaching the course for which you registered, I earned my way there, and my intermittent typos and misspoken words—which I try to quickly correct—do not negate that fact. Furthermore, the simple fact that, at times, I make mistakes does not necessarily imply that the error is mine in every case of miscommunication. In short, everyone should practice the principle of charity, not only in reading someone's work, but also when making any judgments about a person's character, potential, whether or not the person has anything of value to teach them, and even when listening to someone speak.

Fifth, there needs to be a shift in the attitudes that some students hold when they take courses from any professor, but especially when they take a course with a disabled, minority professor. Students need to understand that they are not in competition with their professor; that finding some fault with a professor's argument, fact, or writing—especially at the risk of assuming an uncharitable interpretation—does not establish them as superior to their professor. They need to understand that their professor is there to help them, rather than hinder them, and that in most cases, when they refuse to be open to the value of their professor's teachings, even if their professors sometimes make mistakes, that they are in fact standing in the way of their own success and progress, not anyone else's. Students, of course, should not refrain from questioning an argument or a proposed fact, but this should be understood as challenging an argument or fact, rather than professors themselves. The intention that ought to motivate students is the desire to be a part of a cooperative pursuit for truth. Intentions make a difference.

Sixth, there needs to be a shift in the attitudes that some professors and staff members take when interacting with each other and any student, especially when one of them is a disabled minority. Professors and staff members should approach relevant interactions in a way that is motivated by their desire to allow others to be a part of a cooperative pursuit for truth. When I interact with my students, I assume that regardless of what they actually say or write, they had in mind, or intended to say, something that is coherent, reasonable, or sensible. I assume that if there was a lack of clarity in what they actually said or wrote, this lack is primarily due to some misunderstanding with the definition of a term, a limitation in their vocabulary, or the use of a problematic rule of inference. So, rather than immediately reply with a negative response, I typically follow up with questions in order to get a better idea of what my students might have in mind, offering a charitable interpretation of what they said as a way to establish an intersubjective perspective that allows a lack in clarity to be brought to light.

Seventh, there needs to be a societal shift in how we, as members of our society, understand the value of education. Not everyone needs a B.A. to flourish. For some, perhaps many, a technical degree may serve them better than a liberal arts education; but every member of a society should be taught and encouraged to communicate clearly, read carefully, think critically, and to take the time to focus on quality (to the best of their ability), rather than quantity, in various aspects of life, especially in learning how to think and communicate with clarity. To do so requires time and patience, which is not available to any educator who is burdened with an excessive number of students or service responsibilities. So, our society needs to realize the value of funding education, and school administrators need to invest in securing and maintaining the quality of what professional academics and staff members do by providing them with what they need, including time, to do their jobs well.

*Are there resources—such as articles, books, and videos—that you would like to recommend on the topics and issues that you have addressed in this interview?*

Thank you for this question. Yes, there are a few resources that have helped me avoid the various hazards and pitfalls of academia, and life in general, that I would like to share.

First, *Mindset* by [Carol Dweck](#), which provides a framework for thinking about oneself and one's abilities that would allow one to approach life and interact with others in ways that encourage, rather than hinder, not only one's own flourishing, but also the flourishing of others.

Second, *Rich Dad Poor Dad* by [Sharon L. Lechter and Robert T. Kiyosaki](#). Along with the lessons my parents taught me, it has helped me immensely with using my money wisely. For example, it helped put some of what I might have considered to be “extravagant spending” into perspective by allowing me to understand how spending a little more upfront on various key items in order to ensure quality is more cost effective in the long run.

Third, *How We Know What Isn't So* by [Thomas Gilovich](#), which is a great introduction to the various errors people make simply by virtue of being human and provides a very good foundation for critical thinking and reasoning. I've used this book in the past for my critical thinking and reasoning courses, and I might do so in the future.

Fourth, any number of text-to-voice applications or PDF readers to help with reading comprehension (not as a substitution for reading) and proof reading. What I like to do, especially with very long readings or writings, is to use these applications to help me quickly review a reading during a long commute or to help me proof read my work by listening as my writing is read to me and following along, reading the text, and catching any grammatical errors or awkward passages.

Thank you again, Shelley. I hope this interview and resources help in some way!

*Cecilea, thank you for your very instructive and provocative remarks throughout this interview. I'm sure that your colleagues have learned a great deal from them.*

*Readers/listeners are invited to use the Comments section below to respond to Cecilea Mun's remarks about learning disability, ask questions about forthcoming issues of the Journal of Emotion, and so on. Comments will be moderated. As always, although signed comments are encouraged and preferred, anonymous comments may be permitted.*

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*Please join me here again on Wednesday, November 16<sup>th</sup> at 8 a.m. EST for the twentieth installment of the Dialogues on Disability series and, indeed, on every third Wednesday of the months ahead. I have a fabulous line-up of interviews planned. If you would like to nominate someone to be interviewed (self-nominations are welcomed), please feel free to write me at [s.tremain@yahoo.ca](mailto:s.tremain@yahoo.ca). I prioritize diversity with respect to disability, class, race, gender, institutional*

*status, nationality, culture, age, and sexuality in my selection of interviewees and my scheduling of interviews.*