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Thomas J. Hynes Jr

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Commentary on Sharon Bailin and Mark Battersby: “Beyond the Boundaries: The Epistemological Significance of Differing Cultural Perspectives”

THOMAS J. HYNES JR.

*Department of Communication
University of West Georgia
1601 Maple St.
Carrollton, GA
USA 30118
thynes@westga.edu*

The basic framework for Bailin and Battersby’s fine paper is a strong one—we are limited in our ability to assess the strength of knowledge claims from our own perspectives when we fail to investigate alternative views of the same claims (often rooted in other cultures). The authors provide exceptional examples from art, from non-western medical practices, among other sources, to demonstrate the value of searching multiple perspectives (especially cultural perspectives) to increase the confidence with which we might adhere to knowledge claims within public or even technical discourse. The focus of these comments will be to explore with my colleagues some of the questions of limits to the requirements that knowledge claims should be tested from cultural perspectives different from those from which the initial claims have been made. There are several questions to which I can provide only tentative answers, but hope that other tentative answers will emerge from our discussions and subsequent work.

Can certain cultural perspectives be readily dismissed as failing to add significant value to knowledge claims?

David Horowitz, of “Academic Freedom” fame, highlights Ann Coulter’s request that American Foreign policy ought to be guided by perspectives taken by radical adherents to Islam. “I began running Coulter columns on my website shortly after she came up with her most infamous line, which urged America to put jihadists to the sword and convert them to Christianity. Liberals were horrified; I was not. I thought to myself, this is the perfect send-up of what our Islamo-fascist enemies believe—that as infidels we should be put to the sword and converted to Islam.” (Horowitz, 2003)

Coulter’s claim was made explicitly to support her consistent attack on multiculturalism. The example is used only to provide support for the author’s implied position: namely, that some limits should and can be found to perspectives that are epistemologically required to make claims from a given perspective.

On its face, there would appear to be a need to find some means by which perspectives are limited. And incommensurability notwithstanding, considerable attention must be paid to identify individuals “warranted” to interpret what constitutes a claim from a particular cultural perspective. (Is Coulter’s interpretation an appropriate

one based on “cultural perspectives” identified as such by adherents to Islam?) Thus, perhaps a more manageable question is, are there conditions under which we can limit review of options/perspectives? Charles Willard has argued, for example, that the tendency toward completion in argument circumstances will naturally lead advocates to bring dissensus to a close, however much it may be valued in certain circumstances. But the authors suggest certain circumstances that will limit the discussions, and many of these offer real opportunity to apply alternate perspectives in ways that will yield real knowledge returns. I offer a few of these strategies only briefly here (and can elaborate if appropriate as we continue to discuss the paper).

Costs of time/resources to apply most conceivable alternate perspectives to claims/interpretations will provide inherent limits to reviews.

This seems a valuable approach, especially if arguers can be called upon to relate the assessment of time/resources devoted to the assessment to the potential implications of the decisions. This strategy would seem to apply to advocates advancing positions in public policy or other decision environments where advocates ultimately wish to reach a conclusion. It would not be applicable in an instance in which an advocate wishes to delay decisions as a systematic strategy.

Assessment of a probability perspective will present meaningful improvements in knowledge claims.

In other words, there should be available means of limiting the number of cultural perspectives reviewed by assessing the probability that such perspectives are held by interested advocates. This is similar to the claim the authors make in seeking evidence available to support the likelihood that alternate perspectives will bring value to a particular position—such as the need to review acupuncture in certain health care discussions. This might be limited because assessment of likelihood of improvements may in fact be perspective bound. And so for example, acupuncture has been occasionally minimized in Western medical circles through questions about the means by which evidence supporting effectiveness has been gathered.) (NIH, 1997)

Assessment of limitations of current perspectives will provide a balanced or fuller perspective on knowledge claims.

Kuhn’s often cited analysis of paradigm shifts suggests that such changes come when conventional perspectives are unable to account in meaningful way for a variety of data/observations. Thus the ability of perspectives to account for a substantial body of data on certain claims may limit the degree to which other cultural perspectives need be reviewed to preserve epistemic integrity.

Evaluation of evidence of value of perspectives may be clouded by vagaries of language and anecdotal nature of some evidence.

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For example: astrology may indeed provide some confirming evidence because those gathering the evidence may see conformation—we are controlled by the stars (even if assertions of gravitational alignments or cyclical pulls cannot provide confirmation through physical science). It is thus essential that similar tests of evidence must be used to review methods or activities that might emerge from outside of a certain set of epistemic claims. For better or worse, once we have accepted the premise that claims rooted in non-Western thinking should be part of a required review, a review of the evidence supporting those claims becomes an added responsibility for the arguers.

The use of extreme versions of other perspectives (logical consequences) may be used to dismiss less extreme views of such perspectives.

In the development of claims that disagreement should be valued over rapid resolution of arguments, critics may point to Monty Python's "Argument Clinic," as a means of dismissing epistemic requirement to examine multiple cultural and disciplinary approaches to truth claims. And so we must fashion means to dismiss extreme cases of alternate cases in order to preserve the ability of arguers to raise those cases.

We may be forced to at least to discuss the question: Are there limits to multiculturalism?

This is not to provide a broadside to multicultural perspectives, as would be the desire of some conservative American media critics a la Sean Hannity or Ann Coulter. But it is to ask about ways in which strategies can be developed to both legitimize the request for epistemological responsibility to review claims from perspectives based on some cultural differences, and to accept the premise that some perspectives will never receive full consideration—taking the sword to jihadists?

There is great value to moving beyond claim of incommensurability, as the paper proposes. It is essential to provide some definitions of terms to avoid most extreme examples of incommensurability—using same terms and only assuming that those terms had identical meanings across contexts and disciplines.

[link to paper](#)

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