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Commentary on Michael David Hazen: “Dissensus as Value and Practice in Cultural Argument: The Tangled Web of Argument, Con/Dis-sensus, Values and Cultural Variations”

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I wish to begin with undisguised praise for the discipline and thoroughness which are evident in this paper. It is a remarkable summary of what is known and unknown about the ways that cultural experience may influence argumentative life. Hazen deftly navigates through substantial literatures in several disciplines, searching for themes that were often invisible to the original investigators. His summaries, both narrative and schematic, are valuable in orienting readers who wish an immediate orientation to the questions Hazen shows to be both fundamental and often unappreciated.

Few things partake more of climate than does culture, and few are more personal than arguing. From culture, we inherit ideology, values, expectations, and theories of what a person is. In arguing, we express our thoughts, commitments, and reasonings. Culture is so atmospheric that it is nearly impossible to perceive from within, while arguing is so immediate and present that it is difficult to maintain an external perspective on what one is doing during the experience. These and other contrasts are what make Hazen's paper so interesting and important.

Having had my own thinking made more precise by Hazen's essay, I would like to explore again how culture and arguing may be related.

The first point I wish to emphasize is how a person actually inherits a culture. This is a key question, and I believe that its answer may well underlie many of the inconsistencies in the research Hazen explores. Certainly we can identify and describe different cultures, but we do so only by examining artifacts produced by individuals. We can find key literate statements, such as the *Federalist Papers* or Augustine's *Confessions*. We can examine spontaneous speech, as when we study naturally occurring argumentative exchanges. And we can scrutinize individuals' responses to carefully worded survey instruments. But for most scholars, "culture" is a summary. At its most visible, it is what Durkheim called a social fact. At its least visible - and it is largely invisible when we discover a person apparently living in a culture who doesn't act like it - culture is merely a vague suggestion. As Hazen makes clear, we cannot confuse nationality with culture.

Culture is inherited largely from communication within one's family and educational system. From our parents, for instance, we learn who and what to respect, and more importantly, we learn the bare idea of respect as well as many others. We come

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to understand the important or irrelevance of group memberships by participating in our own family, and perhaps in other parent-approved groups such as youth organizations or sports clubs. In schools, we encounter authority figures, who sometimes act like our parents and sometimes not. School lessons deliver cultural values to impressionable minds. Sometimes this instruction is explicit, as when we learn a particular version of our national history. In other cases, the instruction is less easy to identify. For instance, many of us learned math with problems like this: You have six apples and Judy wants two of them. If each apple costs 5 cents, how much should Judy pay? This is an arithmetic problem, and few look here for ideology. But if you have an excess of apples and Judy wants two of them, why don't you just give them to her? This is capitalism's math, and it seeps into us at a young age.

So the way to think about culture is as an inheritance, and the place to look for it is within the individual. Scholarly generalizations about culture derive from our studies of national literatures, political systems, kinship relationships, spontaneous methods of organizing, structured questionnaires, and many other sources. But these merely suggest clues as to what we should look for. Hazen shows that we have excellent reasons to seek differences in individualist versus collectivist orientations, expectations about power relations, levels of competitive impulse, and similar things. In the work Hazen reviews, sometimes researchers found the distinctions they expected and sometimes they did not. In each case, the evidence came from individuals, not from common literary possessions or similar materials.

While the idea of culture is a powerful one, we must be careful in using it to describe people. This audience will immediately appreciate that something generally true of Japan is not necessarily true of a particular Japanese citizen, and we even have a name for that sort of thinking: the fallacy of division. But I think there is an even more insidious temptation, to use culture as a literal term when it is properly figurative. In the theories we wish to develop, we must avoid animating or personifying culture until we have justificatory evidence. We should begin with the idea that culture is not itself an agent influencing arguments. It is only a set of possibilities, which may or may not be instantiated in a particular person. Certainly we have good reason to suppose that an individual will be susceptible to the perceptions that his or her immediate culture makes salient, will absorb the expectations that are expressed by those nearby, and will tend to act in accord with local rules. But all of these things are matters of degree, and the fact of cultural change makes it obvious that cultural resistance is just as permanent as cultural adherence.

Hazen's paper, combined with his characteristic thoroughness, makes it evident that we are missing much of the information that our own community would most like to have. Hazen has summarized what material is available, and we can use this as starting points. We know a few things about different thresholds for initiating arguments, thresholds for responding to challenges, general orientations (e.g., constructive or destructive competition), and the strength of various constraints on arguing, such as face and politeness. The list of what we don't know, and would like to, is much longer, however. We don't know if different cultural orientations point to different sorts of evidence, different facility with various argument schemes, different attractiveness of various formal and informal fallacies, different levels of clash, different qualities of

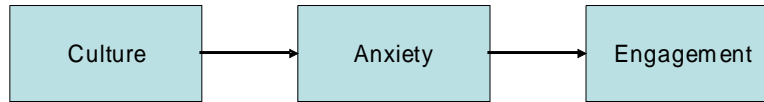
argument, and many other things represented in the papers at this conference. How should we begin to investigate these things?

I think our community should go through two stages in pursuing such work, and the first is not one we ordinarily spend much time on. We must begin with a serious interrogation of whether our research interests are themselves culture specific. We all pursue a specialization that was born in Athens, reproduced by the Roman Empire, given excruciating detail in the Middle Ages, freely explored in the Renaissance, and reified in Western universities. While it is safe to assume that all humans reason, this is no warrant for the assumption that they all have the same understanding of what they are doing when they engage in what we would call arguing. Even within our own Western cultures, we know that ordinary actors have very different meanings for words that you and I would collect together. When a conversation goes very badly, they call it an argument; when it is peaceable and reaches an easy conclusion, they call it a discussion; when it is unresolved but not dangerous, they call it a disagreement. I suppose that every language has its own set of words for these and other experiences, and simply identifying and matching them up (if that is possible) is a substantial undertaking. Frankly, my worries about this issue give me concern about what those survey items meant in Japan, Cameroon, and China. Back translation by Western-educated researchers will not detect the problems if "argue" has different implications in different language communities.

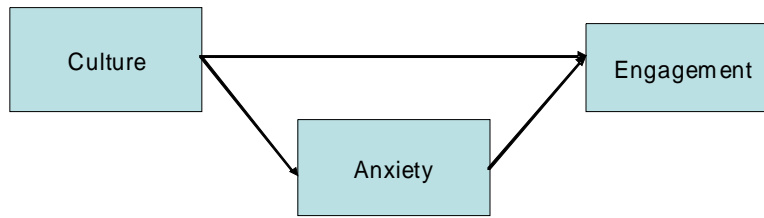
But let me assume that we can do this, and assume further that our Western ideas about arguing are the ones we end up endorsing. What is the second step in exploring the relations between culture and arguing? Our fundamental task here is to find out whether culture is a direct or mediated influence on arguing behaviors. Permit me to illustrate this issue in regard to two matters prominent in Hazen's review: engaging in arguments, and actual argumentative behaviors.

In the West, we have found that people avoid arguments when they are low in argumentativeness and high in communication apprehension. Let us suppose that these things are also true in some measure in all other cultures. We need to test two different models of the relationships among culture, avoidance motivation, and argument engagement. Here are the two models.

Culture, Anxiety, and Engagement



Case 1: Culture's Effect is Completely Mediated



Case 2: Culture has a Direct Effect

In the first case, culture causes anxiety which in turn causes engagement or nonengagement. If this diagram is accurate, we can statistically control anxiety and should then find no relationship between culture and engagement behaviors. Without controlling anxiety, we would find an apparent correlation between some appropriate measure of culture and the engagement behaviors. Case 1 indicates that all of culture's power is absorbed into and expressed by individual personality and character.

In the second case, however, culture is shown as having both a mediated effect and a direct one. Here if we control anxiety, we will still show an association between culture and engagement, and this would indicate that not all of culture's influence is channeled through individuals. How would we interpret this? A likely way to understand the second case is to say that culture is a social fact, and that it therefore constrains what people do regardless of their individual inclinations. A standard example of a social fact is money. Whether you are aware of it or not, whether you have any of it or not, whether you approve of the idea of it or not, in our society money will affect your life. Culture may be like that, and the evidence will be that something like the second case is supported by empirical data.

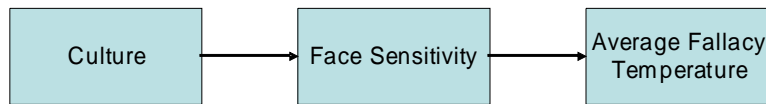
This strategy can be applied to other questions, questions that might be immediately more interesting to conference participants. Hazen shows us that many have investigated the nature and importance of politeness and face issues in different cultures. In extending this issue, permit me to introduce the idea of hot and cold fallacies.

Some fallacies strike me as especially liable to generate emotional reactions. The fallacy *ad hominem*, for instance, might well generate anger. An argument *ad misericordiam* might induce sympathy or disgust, depending on whether the arguer seems sincere or is just being a "drama queen." Interruptions and other forms of floor domination might well engender resentment. These are examples of hot fallacies. Cold fallacies do not immediately lend themselves to these levels of emotionality.

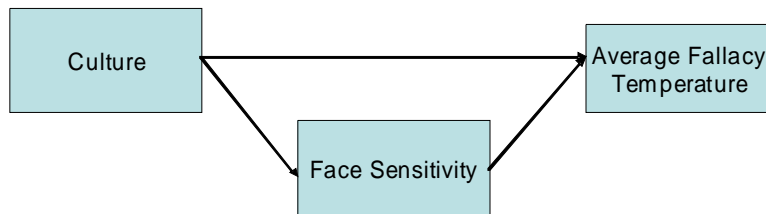
Undistributed middle terms, for instance, are just reasoning errors, and affirming the consequent might be as well. This is all a matter of degree, I want to emphasize, and it is not too early to warn against any attempt to create a secure classification of an argument scheme as hot or cold. An *ad hominem* might be received as loving correction, and a fallacy of composition might give rise to accusations of racism. So it will be the particular argument rather than its characteristic form that is hot or cold. Still, it does seem to me that some of the forms have more potential for emotionality than others. Let us suppose this to be so, at least for the moment.

In studying the effects of culture on argument production, perhaps we would wish to see whether different fallacies are more or less likely in different cultures. We can see our basic research question displayed again below. Sensitivity to face issues has taken the place of anxiety, and our dependent variable is now the likelihood that a person will declare himself or herself willing to use arguments that we have already determined to be hot or cold in that culture.

Culture, Face, and Temperature



Case 1: Culture's Effect is Completely Mediated



Case 2: Culture has a Direct Effect

I hope a glance will show that our analytical strategy would be the same as for the earlier example of anxiety and engagement. Generally speaking, what we need are three (or more) phenomena that we can measure, and that we have good reason to suppose are related to one another. Exploratory research will need to be done in order to establish that the personal variable (anxiety or face sensitivity) is actually related to the outcome variable of interest (engagement or temperature) in one or more cultures. Other preliminary work will have to be done to ensure that some valid measure of culture is associated with the personal variable. With such a basis in the literature, researchers will be prepared to test whether culture's effects are mediated, direct, or both.

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While I think that this issue of how culture affects arguing behaviors is fundamental, quite a lot of other work can be done without worrying about the nature of culture's effects. It would be wonderful to know whether bad arguments are universally recognized as such: whether personal attacks are rejected at the same levels, whether anecdotes are more persuasive in some parts of the world than others, whether slopes are equally slippery in all language communities. We would benefit by knowing whether engagement and avoidance take the same forms, or in what respects these practices differ. In reading Hazen's paper, I frankly wondered whether one culture's explicit conflict was the same as another culture's.

Many of these questions may strike you as undesirably sociological, and therefore someone else's business. However I suspect that we would learn a lot about argument schemes by studying those most common elsewhere and wondering whether cultural peculiarities could be abstracted in the service of more general descriptions of various argument forms. I am sure that study of different arguing behaviors will afford stimulating contrasts to our mostly American findings about how people exchange reasons face to face.

For these and many other reasons, I applaud Hazen's paper. While some of his detailed findings are unsatisfying to those, myself included, who would prefer simple generalizations, he has shown the fluidity and textured nature of what we presently know about the connections between culture and argument. Reading his paper would be an excellent first step toward careful investigation of this topic.

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