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Comment on Dale Hample and Diana Njweipi-Kongor's How Do People Feel About Arguing – And How Should We Study It?

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1. Introduction

The work in this paper is a continuation of the research in interpersonal arguing that professor Dale Hample has carried out for many years. In many papers and in books like *Arguing. Exchanging reason face to face* (Hample, 2008) and *Interpersonal arguing* (Hample, 2018), Hample has developed the field through special attention to how ordinary people think about and carry out arguing. Among many important insights this has contributed to a better understanding of what people think they are doing when they argue, so called *arguing orientations*. Among other things this includes what people consider the personal goals of arguing, which may be *instrumental* (to get something), *domination* (to overwhelm the other), *identity display* (to show one's commitments), or *play* (to argue for entertainment). I has also been an ambition for professor Hample to understand how arguing orientations differ across nations and cultures.

For several reasons, the paper by Hample and Njweipi-Kongor is an interesting example of this type of research: it poses intriguing questions, use methods that are still relatively rare in argumentation research, and it explores a continent and country, in which many of us – or at least I – have very little knowledge about tradition of rhetoric and argumentation. The paper, the authors writes, is the first that gathers data of this sort originating from the African continent.

According to the authors, the Republic of Cameroon has experienced armed uprisings beginning in 2016 (p.1). In these dangerous times, they collected data bearing on how people felt about interpersonal arguing:

Are they willing to argue? Is disagreement rare because it might be dangerous? Is arguing seen as a potentially constructive activity, or one carrying risks rarely experienced in quieter Western nations? (p. 1)

While these questions are indeed important, they also seems to invite answers enough to fill at least a couple of dissertations. The purpose of the study, the authors write, is to «generate a descriptive outline of the main respects in which citizens of Cameroon orient to the activity of interpersonal arguing» (p. 3). Methodologically, they use surveys to measure motivations to argue, understandings of the nature of interpersonal argument, and reactions to the experience of face-to-face disagreement. These are survey batteries previously used by Professor Hample in his “global project”, where he seeks comparisons from one nation to another (cf. Hample, 2018).

While most work in argumentation studies used to be solely theoretical, Hample are among those has pushed our field further through methodological innovations. His insistence on empirical work on argumentation has renewed the field and provided important insight into how people actually argue and into what they think they are doing when they do so. As Hample himself has pointed out: the “final validation of theory is empirical observation” (Hample, 1992, p. 94).

So empirical methods are important to the study of argumentation, but all methods have challenges. For the empirical social scientific studies, especially for survey studies, one important challenge is the leap from empirical observations to theoretical explanations. Explaining what the numbers mean is always a precarious affair. This challenge begins with the kind of questions we may ask – and which we expect to answer with our choice of methods.

2. The issue of intolerance, violence and the hesitance to engage in arguing

In the present paper, the authors claim that from «the political and media perspectives, Cameroonians are generally «intolerant of other people’s views and opinions» (1). I am not entirely sure from reading the text, what makes the authors able to make this claim. The authors also write that “[t]he intolerance of divergent political opinion that has taken center stage in Cameroon has trickled down to be displayed in different forms of violence amongst its population” (p. 3). The paper points to several such issues: government censorship and harassment of journalists, penal codes making the issue of truth uncertain and thus dangerous for ordinary people.

I am not familiar with the law and culture in Cameroon, however, it seems somewhat of a speculative leap to connect general intolerance of other people’s views – if that is indeed true – to violence and to the willingness to engage in argumentation in private life. I am also doubtful that survey results are able to provide such a connection.

Still, Njweipi-Kongor and Hample seem to suggest that a high degree of violence and intolerance in a society leads to caution in rhetorical exchanges. Granted, there are reasons to believe that state censorship and violent inclinations may lead to hesitance or even resistance to engage in interpersonal argument – at least in public. At the same time, it might also be the case that interpersonal argument in private could be both frequent and vigorous – precisely because it is private.

The relation between intolerance, violence and expression is a complex issue. In the field of extremism studies, for instance, scholars have noted that repressive measures meant to curb radical right actors and opinions have a tendency to fuel more extreme forms of activism” (Ravndal, 2018, p. 851). Studies by Jacob Aasland Ravndal (2018) has suggested that in some cases right wing terrorism and violence may be caused by an extensive public repression of these actors and their opinion. In a North European country such as Sweden, he finds that the rise of right wing violence is connected with the combination of high immigration, low electoral support for anti-immigration (radical right) parties, and *extensive public repression of radical right actors and opinions*. Admittedly, the causal link here goes the other way, and there is a long way from European right wing extremism to the connections between violence, intolerance and the conditions of interpersonal argument in Cameroon. Still, I think, such studies points to the complexity of the relations between intolerance, violence and willingness to express opinions and argue.

Nonetheless, the paper of Hample and Njweipi-Kongor raise the important question of what intolerances of other people’s view might be and how this might effect if and how people engage in interpersonal arguing. The actual research questions, however, are limited to the scope of the method:

RQ1: Do men and women in Cameroon differ in their arguing orientations?

RQ2: Do arguing orientations in Cameroon differ from those in France and/or the U.S.?

RQ3: What are the correlational patterns among arguing orientations in Cameroon?

The results to RQ1 indicate that “that men and women tend to be similar in their orientations, only being distinguishable in their felt stress and expectations of civility (women were higher on both» (11). The results to RQ2 indicate that

compared to France and the U.S., Cameroonians had more energetic engagement with the possibility of arguing, whether indexed by the motivation measures or the personal goals scales in the frames battery. Negative emotional reactions to the experience of arguing were less noticeable in Cameroon than the other two nations, with the exception of persecution feelings, which were high in Cameroon. (p. 11)

Based on the results of RQ 1 and 2 and the correlational patterns (RQ3), the authors conclude that Cameroonians are:

quite willing to argue face-to-face, and men and women have equivalent impulses in this regard. Their expected levels of cooperation and civility are not unusual, however, suggesting that they may not have quite the disciplined politeness that we have found in several other nations with high engagement tendencies. But we see no evidence that they are particularly rude or unpleasant, with the exception of their high score for antisocial verbal aggressiveness, which might point to routine use of ad hominem remarks. (p. 12)

Interestingly, despite the assumed intolerance and reported violence, compared to France and the U.S., Cameroonians did not express hesitation in engaging in arguing. Actually, the results indicate that they «had more energetic engagement with the possibility of arguing» (11), and the «[n]egative emotional reactions to the experience of arguing were less noticeable in Cameroon». The reasons for this, of course, are harder to establish, and survey studies alone cannot provide the answers.

3. The challenge of studying cultures and groups

Survey studies are generally good at documenting differences, but not well suited to explain them. This is the case both for national and cross-national differences, and for differences in areas such as gender and age.

The sociologist Roger Melingui is quoted about a study he did, which the authors write demonstrates how «parents are finding it increasingly difficult to communicate with their children and at the same time, children are embarrassed to discuss sensitive topics with their parents». This is described as a “clash of cultures” (2). The psychologist Iris Efoa is quoted for calling this a «breakdown in dialogue between parents and children», that is «caused by a combination of several factors, such as education, social background, personal history of the parents and even their temperament» (3). I wanted to explore in more detail the work of Efoa and Melingui, however, unfortunately neither were to be found in the reference list, and none of them turned up in a Google Scholar search.

Like the issues of intolerance and violence, the “clash of cultures” is put forward as an assumption – or hypothesis – that Cameroonians will be less inclined to engage in argument. However, as we know, the study did not confirm that. Actually, to me – a Danish citizen living in Norway, with my wife and two daughters – the described clash of cultures between parents and young adults, seem more recognizable than foreign. It would have been interesting, though, to examine the question of different arguing orientations between adult and young people. The benefit of the type of method used is that one can run analyses of any of the selected variables, such as age. However, since age was not collected and adults not included, unfortunately it is not possible to say anything about generations in the present study.

In mentioning method, a disclaimer is needed: Even though I have carried out some quantitative social scientific work, I am by no means an expert in surveys and experiments. Still I wonder if the method of Hample and Njweipi-Kongor runs into some of the challenges we know from the use of this the type of surveys, experiments, and semantic differential scales as used in for instance psychology.

Firstly, the respondents of Hample and Njweipi-Kongor, were “59 Francophone students studying English as a second language, enrolled in an M.A. program” (5) at the institution of Njweipi-Kongor. As the authors indicate themselves, this is a rather small sample.

Secondly, even though studies using these methods in psychology and social science clearly aims to teach us about human behavior and attitudes in general, the often teach us only about the behavior and attitudes of American college students. Now, American college students are humans as well, I suspect, but as we know, they are a special kind of humans. I would guess that the same is the case for students in Cameroon. Actually, the paper of Hample and Njweipi-Kongor points to this in their mention of the work of Melingui, who finds that parents are finding it increasingly difficult to communicate with their children. This culture clash clearly indicates that the views of discussion and argumentation held by young people are very different from the ones held by adults and older people. This suggests that a study of 59 students cannot really be read as a study of Cameroonians in general. As far as I can see, at least this makes the national comparison problematic. It seems to me that the study is not comparing Cameroonians to French and U.S. citizens, it is comparing young students from Cameroon to the kind of respondents that were included in the studies in France and the U.S. Studying college students, I would say, is neither the same as studying humans in general nor studying a national culture.

Again: I am not an expert in the methodology used by Hample and Njweipi-Kongor, so it would be interesting to hear the authors view on this.

4. New possibilities for research in interpersonal arguing

As mentioned, through the use of empirical methods and a global outlook, this paper – and the previous work by Hample – has benefitted the study of argumentation and especially the study of interpersonal argumentation. At the same time, it is worth remembering that all methods have their limits. Thus, it would be interesting, I think, to combine the survey research with qualitative interviewing, observation, and ethnographic rhetorical work. While surveys are excellent in establishing differences across nations, gender or similar social categories, qualitative work would provide much more detailed understanding of the three categories of examination for the paper, but also for the themes of much of Hample’s other work. Interviewing, observing and talking to people could teach us much about their motivations to argue, their understandings of the nature of interpersonal argument, and their reactions to the experience of face-to-face disagreement. I believe it could be especially interesting to carry out rhetorical reception analysis (Kjeldsen, 2018) in the form of protocol analysis (Bengtsson, 2018) where informants observe other people argue, for instance on video, while they simultaneously comment on the arguing. In relation to the “global project,” it seems – at least as far as I am aware of – that no studies have yet been done in Scandinavia. Since the Scandinavian countries are among the most egalitarian and equal in the world and consistently scores highest on trust and happiness, it would be very interesting to examine the arguing orientations of Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. Indeed, so it is: good research begets more research.

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