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Commentary on Evidence, Persuasion, Diversity – and Children

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1. Introduction

Kloster and Anderson have written an inspiring paper, encouraging us to expand our thinking about argument cultures, their members, and standards. They are working toward understanding how “groups can welcome and benefit from the individual diversity which is already present in our communities” (Kloster & Anderson 2020, p. 2). To do so, they focus on “groups whose members may have divergent or incompatible beliefs about evidence or rational persuasion” (ibid) and highlight children arguers as a paradigm group with the opportunity to create their own diverse argument culture. The example of children is contrasted against other established argument cultures, especially the law, to support the claim that although following best practice is good in some situations, there are plenty of situations where we should be open to acknowledge the value of new standards we may never have come to in a less inclusive argument culture. I am largely sympathetic with aim of the project – to expand the way we think about standards of reasoning and argumentation, and who to include when identifying members of argument(ation) communities. In that light, the following commentary is aimed at highlighting areas for expansion and clarification that, I think, would help strengthen the foundation being laid for a project with many highly worthwhile branches for continued research.

2. Diversity, Autonomy, and Truth

The first place it may be valuable to clarify and expand regards how the relationship between arguer diversity and argumentative standard setting, and the relationship between the emergent standards and epistemic quality of the results, interact. The authors argue that in diverse groups the “[c]o-creation of reasoning permits not just the reasons but the practices of argument to vary from previous or external standards, in accordance with what the group members collectively are comfortable with as evidence and as techniques of persuasion” (p. 8). This is valuable in part because, if a “group does not conform to existing reasoning practices as measured by recognized tests, the group can take responsibility for creating, testing, and implementing its own standards of acceptable reasoning” (p. 14). To make their case for more flexibility on these standards they provide an example of kindergarten children discussing what counts as ownership, and an Asian undergraduate contrasting his understanding on the same topic against his peer’s. They also provide examples of the separation between indigenous and colonial views regarding why and how legal reasoning should take place. These examples explore how diverse groups can have diverse argument cultures, which can lead to new understandings and better reasoning among group participants.

In light of their examples of the difference between colonial and indigenous perspectives on law, and differing views of ownership, expanding the limits of what counts as an acceptable

contribution to the resolution of a difference of opinion on these matters may indeed help the participants come to a resolution, or if resolution is not the goal, at least the ability to discuss these topics amicably. But as the authors also note, we are lucky to live in a Canadian context where group diversity is encouraged and normalized to greater degrees (even if still far from ideal!) than in other parts of the world (p. 6). One worry I have, however, is that relativizing what counts as an acceptable argumentative standard to a group who may have a false or exaggerated confidence in their diversity could lead to the amplification of accepting false beliefs. For example, I can imagine a seemingly diverse group of flat earthers getting together and determining their own standards for what counts as evidence. If as Kloster and Anderson argue, “the evidence a group uses, the standards by which it is assessed, the forms of persuasion they use and the effectiveness with which they persuade others are all open to evolution as the discussion continues... It need not reflect any particular choices of roles or types of facilitation in order to produce ‘the best’ reasoning” (p. 9), then I think it is important to highlight the conditionality of their central claim on the potential to improve epistemic outcomes. In other words, it may be only IF diversity and IF common norms of open mindedness and respect are followed that free and diverse discussion MAY lead to a positive outcome. If any of these conditions are not met, I worry that the risk to truth of relativizing standards of argumentation to any particular group may loom and perhaps even amplify (Sunstein and Hastie 2015).

Finally, giving autonomy to individual groups to determine their own standards of reasoning and argumentation may also increase the chances of encountering deep disagreements. If two argument cultures have markedly different standards of evidence and inference, and there is no abstract or authoritative view of reason, appeal to which could help settle a matter, it is unclear how rational disagreement resolution between these two groups could meaningfully get underway. This problem may be seen in their example of the difference in view between colonial and indigenous perspectives on law. I would like to hear more about the potential for their overall suggestion in the paper to contribute to improving a gap of this proportion.

3. Children Arguers

Given my interest in youth and argumentation, I was also especially drawn to the discussion of children as arguers. One aspect of the discussion that may benefit from clarification regards the competency of children arguers and their acceptability as members of any given argument culture. Throughout the paper, Kloster and Anderson reference children’s ability to participate in reasoning and argumentation. But at the same time, they are the central contrast, identified as a paradigm example of arguers (mostly) free from argument culture, able to create their own culture outside traditional restraints. For example, they say “Children are presumed not to bring any extensive experience to reasoning” (p. 1), which is partly why they are used as the contrasting class against established argument cultures. Yet, the Philosophy for Children program recognizes that “At the heart of all practices of Philosophy for Children is the recognition that children are capable of reasoning together and reasoning well about both abstract and applied philosophical issues” (p. 10).

This tension raises two areas that might benefit from clarification. The first regards the extent to which recognizing children as people who can reason well begs the question of what constitutes reasoning standards. In other words, to what extent would we be able to say children are capable of “reasoning together and reasoning well” if we have not already determined a

framework to identify and evaluate reasoning? How could such an evaluation of children's abilities occur if we did not already have the standards we are waiting to see emerge from them?

One response could be to argue, in line with the evolutionary theory of argument, that reasoning is not a purely learned ability, but is at least in part innate (Mercier 2011). Taking this approach, however, it would still help to identify to what extent the new standards emerging from diverse groups are unique and to what extent they conform with such an evolutionary view.

The second area that could be clarified regards the justification for why children are or are not rightful participants in any given argument culture. The authors seem to have some conflicting sentiments in this regard. Toward the end of the paper, Kloster and Anderson write, "Where adults differ from children is in having *a much clearer entitlement to participate* in reasoning. If we accept that children have the ability to engage in rational thought and rational argument, that they have perspectives and criticisms, and experiences to draw on that adults may not, it follows that it is also worthwhile searching for ways to hear what they have to say *for the sake of inclusion*" (p. 13, emphasis added). Especially in light of much of the rest of the paper, I am not sure why adults should be thought to have much clearer entitlement to participate in reasoning, or why if children are permitted into these practices it only be for the sake of inclusion.

It seems more consistent with much of their paper to argue, as I believe, that children have exactly as much entitlement to participate in reasoning as adults do. This is not just because of their abilities, but because they are humans deserving of recognition as knowers and transmitters of knowledge. Even if they may be wrong more often than adults, the grounding justification for their entitlement to participate in argumentative practices should not change. And, as Kloster and Anderson emphasise, we can learn from them much more often than we may think. This sentiment seems much more consistent with their ideal of "using principles of accommodating diversity, [so that] a group can co-create the standards of evidence and methods of persuasion that would permit children and adults to participate as equals in reasoned discussions beyond the classroom" (p. 14). So, a further clarification of the level of entitlement children should have to participate in argumentative practices, along with an explanation of the grounding for that view, would help reconcile this tension.

4. Conclusion

Kloster and Anderson have presented a strong argument for expanding our thinking about argumentation standards and how they relate to differing argument cultures. I find the paper not only persuasive, but noble. At heart it tells us to be humble, and for good reason – there is much we don't know, and the consequences of that ignorance may cause unnecessary harm via community exclusion. Opening ourselves to new possibilities and understandings of what argument can be by encouraging diversity in our argument cultures may not only benefit our argumentative practice, but also welcome a number of people into a culture from which they have been excluded for too long.

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