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Commentary on “The Problem of Mission Creep: Argumentation Theory meets Military History”

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I think that a great deal of what Kvernbekk, Cohen, Boe-Hansen and Heintz have in mind with their evocative metaphor of mission creep is embodied in the kinds of digressions that I have examined in third-party dispute mediation, especially the kind that shows up among divorcing couples who have to decide on custody and visitation arrangements for their children (cf. Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1993, chapters 4 & 6; Jacobs, 2002; Jacobs & Jackson, 1992; Jacobs, Jackson, Stearns & Hall, 1991). Another interesting forum for such phenomena is the press conference, where standpoint emergence itself can be the unanticipated outcome of journalists' efforts to pin down the speaker's commitments (Jackson, Jacobs & Zhang, 2020). Mediation sessions, in particular, illustrate a possibility for argumentation that the authors do not explicitly consider--the creation of a role that amounts to the "top-down" control of the discussion whereby the mediator is supposed to keep the disputants on track (Jacobs & Aakhus, 2002a; 2002b). The problems mediators face look very much like mission creep problems seen as a problem of top down control. Space does not allow me to dive into the examples of digression and emergence discussed in those papers, but suffice it to say that a great deal of their dynamics hinges on the way the local demands of immediate response become untethered from the overall and initial purposes of the exchange, on the problems of balancing and managing what turn out to be competing multiple demands, and on the general communicative difficulties of expressing the relevance and pertinence of any particular move not just to the immediately prior move but to the overall set of issues and purposes in play. As the authors note, the local, the contingent, the immediate, and the open-ended nature of argument response all work to Here, let me look at some exchanges that highlight properties of mission creep that I think are consistent with the authors' analysis, but are not emphasized the way other properties are in the paper.

First, the bilateral quality of argumentation makes for some paradoxical consequences as to what mission creep looks like. It depends on your point of view. Consider the following example (from Jacobs, 1985, p.158). The exchange occurs during an initial psychotherapy session between a young female patient (Pt) and a middle-aged male therapist (Dr). The references to "them" in turn 01 and to "they" in turns 04 and 06 are to the patient's parents.

- 01 Pt: I don't want them to have anything to do with my life, except ((pause))
[security (?)
02 Dr: [You live at home?
03 Pt: Yes.
04 Dr: They pay your bills?
05 Pt: Yeah
06 Dr: How could they not have anything to do with your life?

The example illustrates a rather recognizable pattern of argument that Bleiberg and Churchill (1975) dubbed a "confrontation sequence." I further analyzed their example in Jacobs (1985). From the doctor's point of view, the entire exchange is an exemplar of a well-executed plan of argument. The simple, well-placed yes/no questions are phrased in declarative form to dramatize the obviousness of answer. Each answer would seem barely contingent--almost guaranteed. And the punchline rhetorical question comes soon enough in turn 06 and is phrased with enough incredulity that the patient is left in obvious contradiction, forced into backdown, and no doubt feeling a bit stupid. (Interestingly, a characteristic response to the punchline in this kind of sequence is not an open backdown or even an answer at all, but awkward silence. See Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1993, chapter 6). In fact, take out the feelings of being stupid, and what we have in this exchange would seem to be a model example of Socratic dialogue and dialectical logic.

I doubt the patient thought of it that way. I expect that if she was thinking about plans, she was thinking more along the lines of Mike Tyson's quip: "Everybody's got a plan until they get punched in the face." I doubt the patient saw the punchline in turn 06 coming, at least, not when she made her initial complaint or when the doctor asked the first question. Maybe not even after the second question. But, at least from her point of view, the exchange must have looked in retrospect a lot like the kind of sidwreck that rests on the localized end of the mission creep spectrum. There is a sense in which every refutational line of argument and every line of rebuttal is designed to end in an outcome not intended nor desired by at least one of the opposing parties.

Second, the bilateral dynamics of mission creep reveal argumentative possibilities as inherently open-ended. When both sides of a (potential) dispute are alert to this interpretive possibility (your plan is my fog), the dynamics of argumentative interaction can be genuinely open-ended. In the case of confrontation sequences, once the target suspects the point of such questioning, looming traps can be avoided, and even turned around, as another example shows.

The following exchange (See Jacobs (2018, pp.270-271; adapted from Jacobs, 1986, pp. 162 & 163). M₁ and M₂ are Mormon missionaries who have come to S's home. M₁ is explaining that the Mormon Church is different from other churches because Mormons believe everyone must be baptized. You can see that the missionaries are trying to get S to backdown from her claim in 04, whose simple negation lets it stand as denial of their distinctive tenet in 01 without having any actual independent content to rebut. The question-answer sequence in 03-04 already marks a shift in issue. In turn 02, S had expressed what might look like an agreement, but oddly, in the context of a proselytizing session stands as an obstacle to the missionaries' presumed long-term goal: to get Mrs. Jackson to convert to the Mormon faith. If disagreement with this tenet of faith is not the basis for resisting conversion, some other basis must remain unexpressed. Whether it is because the missionary's question in 03 suggests that her statement in 02 creates this sort of "problem" or it is just because of the ties and well-pressed white short-sleeved shirts, S is clearly suspicious that she is being led into a trap. And S's answers to the subsequent questions can be seen as designed to avoid getting caught in such a trap even if she can't see exactly how the questions are supposed to lead her into a trap or exactly what the trap amounts to. What is interesting is that when the senior missionary (M₂) tries to spring the trap anyway, S initiates a mini-counter confrontation sequence. Now, it is the missionaries who are seemingly caught in a contradiction of their own. Now, they must seemingly either backdown from some presumed but unexpressed stance motivating their line of questioning or else they must defend themselves regarding a whole new issue that they probably never anticipated opening up.

- 01 M1: . . . Okay? So there's one- one difference. ((pause)) Okay?
 [We believe every-
- 02 S: [My church believes that too.
 ((pause))
- 03 M1: Uh, well what do you believe?
 ((pause))
- 04 S: I don't believe that.
- 05 M1: You don't believe the Bible?
 ((pause))
- 06 S: No:, not- ((pause)) Well I don't believe that uh, uh, uh, put into the context
 of our times that that's true.
- 07 M2: Welllll, does Jesus Christ change from age to age? Does he change?
 ((pause))
- 08 S: The world has changed.
- 09 M2: Does Jesus Christ change?
- 10 S: No, but that doesn't mean that the meaning of his words doesn't.
- 11 M2: Oh, but it does.
- 12 S: Uh- heh-heh-heh ((nervous giggle))
- 13 M2: Mrs. Jackson, I think you need to find out what you believe, first of all,
 ((pause)) You've got to find out- reach down inside of yourself and find
 out what you believe. 'Cause it sounds like you're not even sure of what
 you believe yourself.
- 14 S: Do you believe that unbaptized babies cannot be saved?
 [That if they die, and they aren't—
- 15 M2: [Oh nno! We don't believe in infant baptism. That it's- We don't believe
 it's necessary.
- 16 S: Then why are you- why are you telling me that my beliefs are inconsistent
 because I say that I don't believe that baptism is necessary?

I think one of the things that the mission creep analogy highlights that is also corroborated by examination of actual cases of interactional argumentation that spin out in unexpected directions is that tree-diagram type planning of how arguments get extended and played out rests on a misleading picture of argument carried over from the tree diagrams of logic. Tree diagrams in logic suggest that argument works in a closed system. Actual argumentation works in an open system. There is no way to specify in advance, even in principle, all the possibilities for the various extensions, turns in direction, issues, problems, tactics, and topics that might arise once an argument is initiated. Linguists have recognized it as the generativity/creativity problem; cognitive scientists as the frame problem. It is time that argumentation scholars recognize it too, and if the term, mission creep, calls attention to this property of argumentation, then sign me up.

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