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A gendered analysis of the role of authority in argumentation

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ABSTRACT: The first part of this paper will look at how essential features of power and authority affect the credibility of arguments. Empirical evidence from communication studies and feminist writings, such as Sue Campbell, and Robin Lakoff, shows that there is inherent disparity in the reception of arguments when presented by men and women. The second part will aim to elucidate how this problem of lack of authority is not addressed by the *ad verecundiam* fallacy.

KEYWORDS: dismissal, credibility, authority, women, *ad verecundiam* fallacy, arguments, Walton, emotions, language, gender.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I argue that the fallacy of *ad verecundiam* fails to address all problems that authority poses for argumentation. A major problem ignored by the *ad verecundiam* fallacy is the lack of authority women and minority groups receive for their words and experiences. In the first half of the paper, I will explain how women are silenced through language usage and styles of communication which results in lack of credibility and authority; this is especially important in arguments where the authority or expertise of the speaker is a deciding factor in the acceptance or denial of an argument. Hence, in the latter half of the paper, I expose the limits of *ad verecundiam* fallacy.

2. WOMEN, LANGUAGE AND AUTHORITY

Many feminist scholars and writers have criticized how language usage can silence women. Marianne Janack in her article, "Standpoint Epistemology without the 'Standpoint'?" (1997) notes that assumptions about a perceived class, race, or gender are crucial factors in the construction of epistemic authority. She explains that this lack of epistemic authority occurs not only in the realm of public policy but also with respect to "the interpretation of social conditions and personal experience" (p. 132). When women give their stories and speak about their experiences, their interpretations are given less credibility than would have been given to men. She cites cases of her female students who complain that their anger, indignation and emotions are dismissed as "ragging out" (ibid.). Janack further draws on examples from her own life experiences where her epistemic authority was questioned, especially during pregnancy. She explains that her complaints and anxiety about unequal household distribution were dismissed by her husband as "pregnancy hormones" (ibid.). Epistemic authority, notes Janack, is conferred in social contexts as a result of the judgments people make about our sincerity, reliability, and trustworthiness. We often do

not have firsthand knowledge about the reliability, sincerity and trustworthiness of the speaker, and instead we rely on outward signs, where women mostly fall prey to lack of epistemic authority, because of gender assumptions and sexism. My point is that women speakers are often judged by their gender, and their intelligence and credibility are threatened as a result. Women's use of emotion is often dismissed; and so because their mode of arguing is embedded in emotion, one can then safely infer that their arguments are similarly discredited.

One way to understand how lack of epistemic authority affects the credibility of women's testimony is through the denial of the importance that emotions play in women's reasoning processes. As Sue Campbell points out in her article, "Being Dismissed: The Politics of Emotional Expression" (1994), emotions have been attributed to women as the ground on which to dismiss women as irrational. Being dismissed, according to Campbell is "when what we do or say, as assessed by what we would have described as our intuitions in the situation, is either not taken seriously or not regarded at all in the context in which it is meant to have its effect" (p. 49). Here, Campbell refers to a situation where women's display of emotion, such as anger, is not taken seriously: women are thus misrepresented as being upset and oversensitive. Women's emotions are characterized as unhealthy, which limits women's engagement in the world (*ibid.*).

We gain insight into the mechanism of dismissal from Campbell's analysis of bitterness, which provides "focus on the role of uptake in emotional experience and the relation of uptake to accountability for expressive failure" (p. 50). Calling people bitter is an attempt at blocking their anger and shifting the attention from the blameworthy behavior that caused bitterness to the speaker's mode of expression, i.e. bitterness that is being condemned. Critiquing people as bitter is a way of silencing them and, as a result, "The expresser cannot account for or defend her intended anger, however, because her interpreters are no longer listening. 'You're so bitter' is meant to be not challenging but silencing" (p. 51). Campbell argues that people whose bitterness is criticized usually are not in a position to influence politicians, bring lawsuits, or make threats. Criticizing people for being bitter, argues Campbell, aims to perpetuate the impoverishment of resources; for once people are dismissed as bitter, others feel no obligation to empower them. Another consequence of this lack of uptake for one's emotions is confusion as it becomes unclear to the accused what he/she is feeling (p. 51).

This silencing and dismissal of women's emotion is very applicable to women participating in politics. For example, during the presidential election of 2008 when Hillary Clinton cried, this became a controversial topic and a major moment in the campaign. Many people questioned Clinton's display of emotion and criticized it as calculated, not genuine, and that it was an attempt to cry her way to the nomination. Prior to crying Clinton was perceived cold, remote, and too focused on policy but when she displayed emotion she was similarly criticized as being either weak or cunning. As such, Clinton's emotions were certainly not taken seriously, i.e. her display of emotion was perceived negatively and it definitely damaged and shattered her image as it resulted in confusion and dismay.

Accordingly, Campbell explains that "...many people's emotional lives are, in fact, dominated by a confusion that is an inevitable consequence of persistent lack of uptake" (p. 55). This negative uptake of one's emotional expression, and being called bitter or sentimental, encourages a gendered and an unequal distribution of expressive resources, and limits the range of expressive acts available to women (p. 55). Thus Campbell demonstrates that women can be dismissed by being denied the right uptake to their

emotional expression. When women's emotional acts are denied legitimacy, then their voices are also prohibited, because women's expression is heavily embedded in emotion, or more accurately in the display of emotion.

In her seminal book *Language and Women's place*, Robin Tolmach Lakoff looks at the ways that gender inequality is played out in language, particularly the ways women use language. Although this book was written in 1975, it still resonates with contemporary issues relating to the way that women can be silenced through language. Lakoff argues that women can be silenced in two ways: one, by being prohibited from saying the same words that men use; and, second, by the lack of uptake their words receive, i.e. women's words aren't given the same weight as men's (p. 210). Women are systematically denied access to power and are deemed as incapable of holding it because of their linguistic behavior. And in turn, they are made to believe that they deserve such treatment because of inadequacies in their intelligence and or education (p. 42). They are denied this access due to linguistic reasons, i.e. modes of communication. Society often listens and pays more attention to speakers who express their opinions strongly and forcefully. And those who are unable to forcefully state their opinions, which is often the case with women, are less likely to be taken seriously or listened to (p. 45).

Lakoff is not suggesting that these indirect, and polite means of expression are innate to women, in fact she argues they may be adopted by any gender, or groups of people. As noted by Keri Hall, many researchers have wrongly claimed that Lakoff characterizes "women's language" as exclusively used by female speakers, but Lakoff's "women's language" is not fundamentally about gender but rather about displayed lack of power (p. 6). Anyone may choose to use these linguistic practices that are associated with women. However, the consequence of these speech patterns often used by women, are taken to reflect something real about the character.

Women are deemed unsure of themselves, unable to make up their minds and cannot be trusted with any real responsibility. Lakoff points out that: "...People form judgments about other people on the basis of superficial linguistic behavior that may have nothing to do with inner character, but has been imposed upon the speaker, on the pain of worse punishment than not being taken seriously" (p. 50). Part of the problem, as Lakoff perceives it, is that women's speech sounds more polite than men's. Aspects of politeness that Lakoff refers to include leaving a decision open, not imposing your views or claims on others, as indicated by the use of tag questions that do not force agreement or belief on the addresser. She uses the example of *John is here, isn't he?* leaving the addresser more leeway, in contrast to the question: *Is John here?* which leaves room for only a yes/no answer (p. 48). Lakoff's central point is that language use changes depending on the position of the speaker in society. The acceptability of a sentence is not a yes-or-no decision. Rather it is "determined through the combination of many factors: not only the phonology, the syntax, and the semantics, but also the social context in which the utterance is expressed, and the assumptions about the world made by all the participants in the discourse." (p. 73). A sentence may be acceptable if uttered by women, yet unacceptable if uttered by a man or vice versa. Women's styles of communication, their display of emotion, their politeness, and their hesitancy when speaking all contribute to the undermining of their words and their perceived lack of credibility.

There is also evidence that women's words in the courtroom are disregarded and ignored. Kathy Mack in her article, "Continuing Barriers to Women's Credibility: A

Feminist Perspective on the Proof process” (1993), looks at the barriers to women’s credibility in the courtroom as a result of gender bias and stereotypes. She focuses particularly on women who testify about rape (p. 328). Mack argues that the first element in the lack of belief in women’s words has a lot to do with the social expectations of how a credible speaker is supposed to sound, which is like a man. Mack also refers to some studies which show that certain features of language are associated with powerlessness such as using superlatives, intensifiers (“so” or “such”), fillers (“uhm” or “you know”) tag questions, hedges (“sort of”) and politeness markers, all of which make the speaker sound hesitant and unsure of herself. Mack argues, as many have, that these features are used mostly by women. Women speakers, she argues, are high pitched, smile frequently, and are hesitant, all of which are associated with powerlessness and help convey lack of credibility (p. 330). Confidence and assertiveness plays a central role with regard to credibility; the more confident you sound, the more credible you will appear. Women are perceived as less believable even when in fact they may be more accurate and honest. For example, women use numerical specificity less often, whereas men use it more often but less accurately. As such, women convey hesitancy even when they are certain. Bringing this back to the courtroom, Mack points out that despite law reforms to trust women’s testimony, women continued to be mistrusted and their words discounted. And, although men lost the unwarranted protection given by substantive and procedural law of rape, the underlying distrust of women and the myth that women lie about rape continue to reassert themselves forcefully (p. 339).

The question that Mack is concerned with is why the law reform designed to alleviate women’s subordination in the courtroom had so little impact. Her answer is that despite law reforms, people continue to hold prejudices, myths, and stereotypes about women (p. 346). And although the law might not support the subordination of women, it still occurs in more subtle and hidden ways due to entrenched gender inequality.

In addition to feminist writing on language, power, and gender inequality, some empirical studies have shown that when women shift away from their mode of discourse to that of a male’s, they receive more credibility. In “Inducing Women to be More Argumentative: Source Credibility Effects” (1985) Dominic A. Infante explores whether women are perceived as more credible when they are induced to be more argumentative. There is some research that shows women are low in trait argumentativeness, which is a willingness to argue, advocate positions, initiate arguments, and express disagreement. So he wanted to see the consequences of argumentativeness for social effectiveness. Infante argues that sex difference in argumentation is crucial to analyze, because the way women are socialized to argue puts them at a disadvantage. Women are socialized to be nonassertive, easygoing and submissive which makes them less argumentative than men. That is because it is often the case that arguing is more aggressive and assertive and requires one to be more argumentative to succeed. Those who argue less have less of a chance of exerting social change or power. Further, he postulates that argumentative behavior in society is a good indication of societal power differences among people and can reveal entrenched dominance-submission patterns (p. 34). And so he posed the following three questions:

If less argumentative women are induced to be more argumentative, will their credibility be perceived more favorable, 2nd: will their credibility be perceived as favorably by male as compared to female observers?, and 3rd: will their credibility be perceived as favorably with males as compared to female opponents? (p. 35).

The results of the study showed that inducing less argumentative women to argue more had a clear effect in improving their credibility (p. 40). This study demonstrates the pressure that women face to speak in the language of men in order to gain some sort of credibility or to succeed in argumentation. But this is not the answer to women's subordination in discourse. The solution is not to teach women to speak like men, because even so women's utterances are not always given a proper hearing.

3. THE LIMITS OF ARGUMENTS FROM AUTHORITY AND ITS FALLACY

The fact that women's words are not taken seriously shows how women do not exert much influence in language and consequently lack authority. The important question to ask is how does this dismissal of women's words and experience affect arguments from authority? There are two issues that relate to women's authority and *ad verecundiam* arguments. One being that if the expertise appealed to in the argument happens to be from a woman, then her expertise along with the argument will be discredited and denied. This is shown by the fact that women's statements are not granted the same authority as men's which suggests that their expertise and qualifications suffer a similar fate. It is safe to conclude that the gender and identity of the expert appealed to makes a difference. For example, there is a difference between appealing to a woman scientist than to a male one and that is explained by the general lack of authority women receive from society as a whole.

The second issue is not about women as experts but rather about the use of arguments from authority, the question of who is providing or making the argument. Since women generally lack authority and are dismissed, this is made worse when women use an argument from authority because the authority of the arguer putting forward the claim affects the credibility and acceptance of the argument. If women's general authority is low then their bringing forth an authority in order to defend a claim or establish an argument is going to have less weight. This is precisely where arguments from authority fall short, and it is these two problems that the *ad verecundiam* fallacy neglects to address.

Argumentation theorists have, for the most part with the exception of a few, ignored the issue of power differentials among speakers. This is important for argumentation theorists because gender and identity politics play an integral role in the acceptance of arguments and the credibility of arguers. Because social identity matters in argumentation, there are much bigger issues regarding authority that can cause problems than those made in explicit appeals to authority. My point is that the fallacy of *ad verecundiam* which aims to address problems with misuse of authority fails to address those posed by gender inequality and power discrepancies among people.

When we appeal to the authority of experts, we trust them to give us accurate information and facts. In his book, *Appeal to Expert Opinion* (1997) Walton identifies two major kinds of appeals to authority: one is administrative authority, which is an exercise of command or influence through one's recognized position of power. The second type of authority is the cognitive authority which is an appeal to an expert in a specific domain of knowledge. Walton explains that these two major senses of authority are dif-

ferent and that an argument appealing to authority may appeal to one without necessarily appealing to the other (pp. 76 f.).

Both of those types of appeal to authority, although different, may be combined in one individual. He gives the example of a doctor who represents both types of authority: on the one hand he is a cognitive expert in medical knowledge; but on the other he exercises administrative authority because of his standing as a licensed physician (p. 77). Walton further notes that a fallacy can occur when the two types of authority get mixed up. As noted by Hans V. Hansen, one way that an appeal to cognitive authority can get into fallacy trouble is by being mixed up with the administrative sense (Hansen 2006: 321). Hansen explains that this happens when we accept a knowledge claim/argument based on the administrative sense of authority rather than the cognitive one. Acceptance based on the administrative authority is a fallacy even if that person possess cognitive authority (ibid.: 321). Walton notes that a fallacy of *ad verecundiam* occurs when there is confusion between the two types of authority. Accordingly, a fallacy can occur when a cognitive appeal to expertise is treated as though it derived its weight not from reason but from an institution of power that forces one to obey the command and accept the argument (Walton 1997: 250).

This approach makes no mention of how administrative authority aids or strengthens epistemic authority. When someone lacks an administrative authority due to gender stereotypes, prejudice, or assumptions about character, then their cognitive authority will similarly be low regardless of whether they may in fact be an expert. As mentioned earlier, such is the case of women scientist who possesses expertise knowledge but no gender or social authority to back it up.

The approach to the *ad verecundiam* fallacy used by Walton and Johnson does not address the problems that authority poses for argumentation. The fallacies approach to argument evaluation is supposed to help us address mistakes in argumentation as argued by Johnson in his article “The Blaze of Her Splendors: Suggestions About Revitalizing Fallacy Theory” (1987), yet this approach when applied to *ad verecundiam* in particular fails to capture serious problems posed by authority.

Walton recognizes many ways that an argument from authority can go wrong. His definition, as I understand it, is that the fallacy of *ad verecundiam* is a failure to address the critical questions related to argument from authority which he offers in chapter 7. In its most basic form, Walton explains, the *ad verecundiam* fallacy is when an argument from authority is presented in a way that not only blocks the asking of the critical questions but also makes such an endeavourer seem improper (p. 249). Walton asserts, “The word ‘uncritically’ is key. If the manner of presentation does not allow for the asking of appropriate critical questions, that is the mark of fallacy” (p. 249). The appeal to authority, in Walton’s view, should never be final and absolute. Walton gives the following five questions for evaluating arguments that appeal to expert opinion (p. 223):

- (1) *Expertise Question*: How credible is E[xpert] as an expert source?
- (2) *Field Question*: Is E an expert in the field that [proposition] A is in?
- (3) *Opinion Question*: What did E assert that implies A?
- (4) *Trustworthiness Question*: Is E personally reliable as a source?
- (5) *Consistency Question*: Is A consistent with what other experts assert?
- (6) *Backup Evidence Question*: Is E’s assertion based on evidence?

Alas, none of these evaluative questions address the problematics of identity, gender, and politics. The criteria used to evaluate arguments from authority further ignore the gender or social status of arguers. My point is that gender should be at the front page of these evaluations as it also plays a role in fallacious reasoning. Questions and evaluation of arguments from authority should be mindful of gender bias that can distort the rating of the credibility of the expert. For example, it is impossible to answer and evaluate the expertise question regarding the credibility of the expert without paying attention to the assumptions one has about what counts as a credible person. Answering these questions and making a decision regarding the expertise's experience and authority is not a bias-free judgment. An expert may be deemed as lacking in expertise based on our perception of their name, job and location. Much more needs to be said about attending to these questions while being mindful of the assumption one makes in answering them.

4. CONCLUSION

The *ad verecundiam* fallacy does not address all mistakes in argumentation that are based on authority. It does not capture the problem of authority that women and other minority groups face. It seems that arguments from authority are only accessible to those with administrative authority, power, and who are in good standing in society, and it is prohibited from those who lack administrative authority, whose gender and identity are discriminated against. If only some people are able to use arguments from authority and the majority of others cannot, then that is a case of an unfair use of authority. However, the fallacy of *ad verecundiam* does not deal with those cases of unfair distribution of authority as it operates in the argumentation arena.

There is a deeper and more complex connection between administrative/command authority and expertise that the fallacy fails to capture. The fallacy of *ad verecundiam* does not help us address implicit bias that interferes with good reasoning. The dimensions of authority revealed to us by its operation in explicit appeals may help make sense of how it operates implicitly revealing to us the dynamic between those who have authority and those who do not. The acceptance of appeals to authority reminds us yet again of the dynamics of power distributions in gender and people in general.

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Commentary on “A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF AUTHORITY IN ARGUMENTATION” by Kahmeiel Altamimi

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Arguments from authority are a ubiquitous and necessary feature of the human project. With them, we can rely upon one another in a joint attempt to find out the character of the world around us. Without them, we are at best trapped in an impoverished narcissistic shell, where the only standard of justified belief available to us is the evidence of our own experience.

Of course, arguments from authority have their limitations. If S’s saying that p is to be a reason for H that p, it must be the case that S is genuinely an authority with respect to p. What this is usually construed as meaning is that it must be the case that S is sincere in saying that p and that S is competent with respect to p: that is, competent with respect to p in particular, as opposed to being generally competent or highly respected. And there are many situations where a speaker is not an authority in this sense. She or he is playing with us or is unfamiliar with the topic in question.

But there are also situations where the authority of a speaker is undermined for a hearer or addressee by the character of the speaker, despite the presence of clear, relevant competence and apparent sincerity, despite even an apparent willingness on the part of the speaker to stake his or her word on the truth of what she or he is saying. It is on some of these situations that Khameiel Al Tamimi focuses in her paper, zeroing in on the sort of delegitimization that can often take place because of the sex or gender identity of a speaker.

Citing the works of Sue Campbell, Robin Lakoff, Kathy Mack and others, she details the ways in which such prejudices are supported, by appeal to supposedly widespread authority—cancelling characteristics of women such as their emotionalism and willingness to express negative emotions, such as bitterness. She discusses as well the differences between the ways in which women and men typically communicate – men, forceful and aggressive; women, polite and deferential—that tend to unjustifiably reinforce these prejudices, showing how such differences play out in critical venues, such as courts of law. And finally, she presents the results of a study that show what happens when women begin to speak and argue more like men. Not surprisingly, they begin to be treated as authorities by those whom they address—again, despite the presence of both competence and sincerity prior to their adjustment in argument style and self—presentation.

That this sort of bigotry is common, I have no doubt. And it has parallels with some of the other clever ways that people have devised to relieve themselves of the responsibility of having to listen and respond to what people whom they don’t particularly like have to say. On its website, the conservative Christian organization, Focus on the Family, for example, argues quite explicitly in favor of the notion that gays and lesbians are inherently unreliable testifiers when it comes to their lives and experiences. The or-

ganization maintains, for instance, that claims by such people to have found romantic happiness with someone of the same sex ought not to be taken at face value because

...while homosexuals may be trying to convince themselves that what they are doing is acceptable they have serious doubts in their hearts. (Myths and Facts About Homosexuality, n.d.)

The group maintains as well that gays and lesbians should not be treated as authorities when it comes to their claims that their sexual desires were not a choice. For this claim is only the first step in an elaborate political strategy.

The more the homosexual community can convince the general public that their homosexuality is beyond their control, the more tolerance or even preferential treatment they can gain in public policy. (Myths and Facts About Homosexuality, n.d.)

And finally the organization tells parents, teachers, ministers, and counselors to ignore claims by gays and lesbians to the effect that their lives are on the whole those of any normal, psychologically healthy people.

They have been wounded by rejection and, in general, seem to say whatever it takes to be considered “normal”. (Myths and Facts About Homosexuality, n.d.)

This is a nasty business, to be sure. But the question that I would raise is: does it rise to the level of enjoining or creating a new kind or a new version of a fallacy? And I don't think that it does, either in this case or in the case of the disenfranchising of women's voices. For it seems to me that what is going on in these cases is a factual discussion about who is and who is not a reliable testifier and what characteristics can be properly tied to such. And from my perspective this is very different from the sort of work that a logician or argument theorist is engaged in when she or he lays out a set of constraints on acceptable argumentation.

To see what I am trying to say here, consider the example of causal arguments. In a causal argument, an arguer is trying to maintain that a certain statement is true, based on the existence of an appropriate causal relation between that part of the world that this statement is alleged to be properly connected with and another part of the world, the action and reality of which is betokened by another statement which forms one of the premises of the argument.

What can the logician or argument theorist tell us about arguments of this kind? Well, based on her or his understanding of the goals of the arguer in using this argument form and her or his understanding of the underlying concepts that are being employed in service to this goal, she or he can tell us, for example, that a causal argument is different from an argument that involves an appeal to mere temporal or spatial contiguity. The one is not a form or a version of the other. And she or he can tell us that any attempt to replace the one with the other, either intentionally or unintentionally, is an error, if indeed it is the causal form of argumentation that one wishes to engage in.

Notice, however, what the logician or argument theorist cannot tell us. He or she cannot tell us, as a logician or argument theorist, what cause—and—effect relations there are in the world. He or she cannot tell us how the world is specifically arranged. This is the task of those who are involved in the special sciences: physicists, geologists, biologists, sociologists, and so on. If an arguer says, for example, that a conclusion is likely true be-

cause the state of the world it betokens was seen through the medium of ESP, it is not the job of the logician to say that this person has committed a fallacy, i.e., an error in reasoning. Whether evidence can be generated through the operation of something called ESP is an issue for physicists and psychologists to resolve, not those who examine those very general structures through which arguments of any kind, with any subject matter, can take place.

The same is true for arguments from authority. Recognizing the goals of such arguments and the concepts that they necessarily involve, the logician or argument theorist can enumerate for us a set of near—misses which should not get to count as the real deal. Among other things, an argument is not an argument from authority:

- when the source is not a genuine authority on the subject at issue
- when the source is biased or has some other reason to lie or mislead
- when the accuracy of the source’s observations is questionable
- when the source cited...is known to be generally unreliable
- when the source has not been cited correctly or the cited claim has been taken out of context
- when the source’s claim conflicts with expert opinion
- when the issue is not one that can be settled by expert opinion
- when the claim is highly improbable on its face

(Bassham et al. 2008: 145 f.)

What the logician or argument theorist can do here, in other words, is work out the implications of the concept of authority and remind us of what states of affairs would be in conflict with this notion. In doing so, she or he would define for us the nature of a fallacy in this form of argument. What she or he cannot do, however, is tell us in what cases we should rationally anticipate the presence of bias, inaccuracy, or unreliability and the converse. Are purveyors of diet pills likely to lie about their product? According to the US Federal Trade Commission, the answer is yes (Specter 2004). But this is something that one has to find out, not something one can deduce from the nature of authority. Do national security planners, working in secrecy, with vastly more information than the general public, tend to mislead the latter as to the activities in which they are engaged? Again, the answer tends to be yes (Cohen 2002), but this is not something that logicians can tell one, as logicians. Some sort of track—record and explanation of apparent unreliability needs to be generated instead.

For all of those millennia when men were ignoring women’s voices – and many women were doing the same—were they committing a fallacy? I don’t think so. Certainly, many of the purportedly factual beliefs upon which their prejudices were based were founded upon fallacies: selection bias, sweeping generalizations, and the like. But many were based upon false factual beliefs as well and have begun to change as these underlying beliefs have finally wilted in the light of evidence such as that which Khameiel Al Tamimi has put in her paper. It is now relatively easy for men and women to make the argument that women as a class are not unreliable authorities. But whether they are or whether they are not is not a matter of logic. Indeed, this is true for any person or group of persons, going back to the Focus on the Family example. It is a matter of how the world is actually arranged.

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