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# Pieces of a Cultural Puzzle: A Reply

CARRIE CRENSHAW

In two very thoughtful responses, professors Rowland and Tuman seem to agree that current debate practice of causal reasoning exhibits a troublesome reductionist tendency. The irony lies in all three of our argumentative attempts to identify the *causes* of this tendency toward poor *causal* reasoning. I initially argued that the practice of poor causal reasoning in part stems from conventional form—the expectation of judges that debaters present single-cause links to monolithic impacts. Tuman responds that "a great deal of this [practice] stems from the appalling lack of scrutiny we bring to the research phase of debate—and the evidence it in turn produces." Rowland argues that "the combination of cultural and strategic constraint largely explains the state of forensic argument about feminism." It is apparent that we ourselves are engaged in an attempt to identify the complex "causes" of a complicated phenomenon involving large numbers of very different people. It seems, then, that some measured self-reflexivity is called for in this ironic endeavor. To that end, Rowland's focus on a cultural perspective is very productive for a cultural perspective on debate practice is necessarily self-reflexive.

One way to fit our few pieces of this cultural puzzle together is to situate our arguments in relation to each other. I contend that the conventional form identified by myself as well as the poor evidentiary practices discussed by Tuman are portions of the larger debate culture referred to by Rowland. Furthermore, these two aspects of debate culture intertwine because our expectations shape our research and evidentiary practice within debate culture. However, to achieve a smoother working fit of these pieces, I will elaborate on some agreements and disagreements I have with these two insightful authors.

For example, my stance on rhetorical proof may yet have some validity. Rowland is correct in observing that empirical proof plays a key role in judgments that we make. However, my point is that the *relationship* between rhetorical and empirical proof is still very much at issue. Current debate practice *privileges* empirical proof at the expense of rhetorical proof. As a result, causal reasoning suffers when questions of human action and motivation are reduced to a level of empiricism that is useful only for causal questions relating to physical or material conditions. The analysis of causal relationships involving the action of human beings necessitates rhetorical proof. This observation does not require the defense of a false dichotomy between empirical and rhetorical proofs. To make judgments, it is necessary to evaluate empirical proof rhetorically. Our assessment of whether or not Clarence Thomas committed sexual harassment depends upon our



rhetorical evaluation of the empirical evidence of what he did. Although we do require information or "data" about past events in this case, determining the past actions of human beings is not the same thing as a scientific empiricism that attempts to control variables experimentally in order to isolate causality. Understanding the relationship between rhetorical and empirical proof, therefore, is a key to more sophisticated causal analysis.

Tuman does an excellent job of addressing this issue. His argument supports the idea that we have a responsibility to utilize rhetorical proofs in the debate process. By insisting on a more sophisticated approach to the research and use of evidence, Tuman effectively claims that we must privilege rhetorical proof. Critical thinking skills must be applied to the evidence that serves as proof in intercollegiate debate to avoid the Perry Mason syndrome. To paraphrase, we must rhetorically evaluate empirical evidence for it to have any real meaning in debate practice. This idea is an observation about conventional form. It suggests that we change our expectations for common evidentiary practice.

Rowland argues that debaters defend single causal links to monolithic impacts because of strategic factors—they have a better chance of winning with this strategy. This contention supports my claim about conventional form. Debaters do not win if judges do not vote for them. Debaters, in order to win, practice conventions that fulfill judge expectation. Thus, evaluating rhetorical proof should be our *responsibility* as forensics educators. Debaters also have the ability to influence judge expectation. Rowland's examples of evolving debate practice concerning counter-plans and topicality point to such a possibility. Nevertheless, Rowland's emphasis on debate culture should not be ignored. I am simply arguing that conventional form can be understood as a part of the larger debate culture.

With this in mind, I continue to defend the position that the dialectical process can in some sense "fix" (as Rowland puts it) the reductionist tendency of argumentation in debate culture. I disagree with his contention that culture *inhibits* the dialectical process in regard to arguments about feminism. My experience has been that debaters are very much enamored of the dialectical process and try very hard to do it well. My sense is that Rowland's claim rests on the question—why don't debaters argue that feminism is bad? Perhaps there is a cultural constraint that inhibits the introduction of this particular argument; however, that does not necessarily mean that the dialectical process as a whole has been subverted. We do not celebrate the dialectical process merely because it promotes "tis/taint" exchanges. We celebrate a dialectical process that encourages the development of quality argumentation.

The most common forms of argument that feminism is harmful are patriarchal "backlash" positions or positions that rest on the assumption that women are inferior and

deserve to be oppressed. The first form, patriarchal backlash, is a more common response to arguments about feminism. It is distinct from the second form in that it does not necessarily rest on the assumption that women are inferior. Perhaps debaters choose not to argue the second form because they see it for the poor argument that it is—a bigoted argument that is only sustained by ignorance and hate. Perhaps this is an aspect of debate culture that we should celebrate in the face of saddening recognitions like Tuman's that intercollegiate debate is still largely oriented towards men.

To be sure, debaters defend other "counter-intuitive" arguments. However, I perceive an important difference between an argument that nuclear war is good and one that argues women are inferior. The latter seems to have more direct implications for women in the debate world. Perhaps debaters are unwilling to argue that women are inferior because they themselves are women and/or they respect colleagues, coaches, co-workers, bosses, mothers, sisters, or girlfriends who are women. For me, it is truly a profoundly alienating experience to participate in or witness debate rounds in which such arguments are made. Such arguments fundamentally deny my competence to participate. Tuman relates an instructive specific instance of this kind of profound alienation in his opening paragraphs. I suspect that many women and men in the debate world at some point have felt the same way.

If it is true that there is an unwillingness to argue that women are inferior, that unwillingness could be a nascent recognition by our debaters of the importance of our various subject positions as human beings in debate rounds. I find such a self-reflexive, feminist recognition to be instructive. We forensics educators could learn from our debaters' emergent realization in two ways. First, we might examine our own subject positions. Have we become coaches who coach competitors much as competitive intercollegiate sports coaches do? Or are we teachers who teach students? Can we be both? The answers to these questions inform the way in which we influence debate culture and the practices within that culture we find lacking.

Second, we can nurture the nascent recognition of the importance of subject position beyond issues of gender. Tuman's insights are relevant here. The marginalization of gay men and lesbians as well as people of color in debate culture at both argumentative and participatory levels deserves much more attention. Participation issues should play a prominent role in our discussion of debate culture.

Naturally, this leads me to reaffirm Rowland's emphasis on the importance of debate culture. His focus provides precisely the kind of framework we need to think about these issues. In addition, Tuman insightfully broadens the scope of issues that merit our concern within this framework. Working this cultural puzzle is an ongoing project—one that will benefit from other case studies, as Rowland observes. However, it is important to understand the difference between a case study of argumentation about



feminisms and a feminist critique of debate culture. They are related, no doubt. However, the latter deserves further attention. For the same reasons that we need case studies of argumentation about "race," we also need treatments of debate culture from a critical race perspective. Marginalized voices have many instructive insights about dominant forms within cultures. We need to make this realization through future research if we are to embrace the self-reflexive stance necessary to make progress on our cultural puzzle.

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