

Diversity in Epistemic Communities: A Response to Clough
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Abstract

In Clough's reply paper to me (2013a), she laments how feminist calls for diversity within scientific communities are inadvertently sidelined by our shared feminist empiricist prescriptions. She offers a novel justification for diversity within epistemic communities and challenges me to accept this addendum to my prior prescriptions for biomedical research communities (Goldenberg 2013) on the grounds that they are consistent with the epistemic commitments that I already endorse. In this response, I evaluate and accept her challenge.

Introduction

In "Feminist Theories of Evidence and Biomedical Research Communities: A Reply to Goldenberg" (2013a), Sharyn Clough addresses the feminist concern of lack of diversity within the composition of scientific communities. She correctly notes that this problem gets sidelined by the form of feminist empiricism that both she and I endorse—what I called "values as evidence" feminist empiricism, and differentiated from the predominant "community-based social knowledge" feminist empiricism of Helen Longino (1990) and Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1990; 1993) (Goldenberg 2013).

"Values as evidence" feminist empiricism uniquely attends to the empirical content of values. Clough's empiricist prescriptions are grounded in her concerns about value-relativism in the dominant feminist empiricist analysis of competing scientific claims (2003b), while mine highlight both that Longino's prescriptions for diverse research communities are likely to be unattainable in the biomedical context, at least in the short-term, and that they are unnecessary for achieving the goal of critical arbitration of underlying value commitments in scientific reasoning (Goldenberg 2013). Instead, I propose, an appeal to the standards of empirical evidence adequately achieves that important end. This moves us away from the diversity requirement, which was firmly established in the "community-based social knowledge" feminist empiricism of Longino. This departure is problematic for Clough and me because we, as feminist epistemologists of science, share the feminist commitment to reducing gender inequity within communities of scientists. Yet our empiricist prescriptions diffuse the prior necessity of diversity for practicing good science (as established by Longino).

Departure

The diversity criterion follows in Longino's feminist empiricism precisely because contextual values function as "background assumptions that themselves may not be subject to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation" (Longino 1990, 75). That is, they

have no empirical content. While contextual values have some influence on the mobilization of scientific evidence—trial design choices, interpretation of data, etc.—social and political values are still ontologically distinct from the empirical evidence. So how do we arbitrate competing values, presumably exposing one to support problematic biases while the competitor does not? Longino prescribes the creation of democratically organized diverse research communities in order to undertake this negotiation. It is “easier for us to identify when and where values are influencing scientific reasoning, if those values or interests are different from our own” (Clough 2013b, 125). The “values as evidence” corrective to feminist empiricism undermined the epistemic distinction between values and evidence by demonstrating the empirical grounding of all beliefs, even social and political values. Thus values can be evaluated empirically for their legitimacy and their comparative epistemic strength against competing values. Cumbersome community debate is not required (Goldenberg 2013).

This empiricist prescription also circumvents a pressing problem for “community-based social knowledge” feminist empiricism, namely its inability to provide empiricist grounds for endorsing feminist values over, say, androcentric and sexist values in feminist research. While diversity plays some role in negotiating the conflict, there are no grounds for rejecting problematic values. “Values as evidence” feminist empiricism can make the case for the epistemic strength of feminist values over androcentric values in many research contexts insofar as the former are better supported by the evidence. This provides additional normative force for feminist empiricism’s interest in the transformation of scientific institutions. But, as Clough highlights, with the successful firmament of the legitimacy of feminist values in science, the diverse community is no longer needed to argue for the rightful place of those values. Diversity may be a good thing, but it is no longer a prerequisite for good science.

Clough is unsatisfied with this consequence of both of our feminist empiricist prescriptions and challenges us to rethink the justification for diverse scientific communities (Clough 2013a). While diversity was previously upheld by feminist empiricists by way of an impoverished theory of values, perhaps there is better justification for maintaining that commitment to diversity in feminist science.

It has been previously suggested that feminist empiricists could improve their justification for diversity by adopting the feminist standpoint commitment to diversity of bodies within scientific communities (Intemann 2010). Kristen Intemann notes that while both feminist science perspectives endorse diversity to promote objective scientific communities, they do so for different reasons. The former does it to manage the biases that value commitments can introduce, while the latter does it to garner the epistemic advantage that diversity of experience or social location offers. She argues that the latter offers stronger epistemic justification for diversity by making the more compelling case for objective science as well as establishing a positive role for feminist ethical and political commitments in science. We have already noted that community-based feminist empiricism struggles in its inability to justify feminist values’ epistemic superiority.

Feminist standpoint theorists maintain that members of marginalized groups can demonstrate epistemically privileged vantage points due to their positions of lesser power and their need to survive within dominant systems of power. This difficult existence can provide members of marginalized groups with illuminating “double vision” or “insider-outsider” perspectives that reveal unfair and unjustified background assumptions as well as methodological biases or design flaws in research protocols. These revealing insights are generally inaccessible to those in positions of social privilege, as one rarely interrogates the workings of the systems within which one characteristically flourishes. The inclusion and critical uptake of those epistemically privileged standpoints that come from marginalized groups can produce more empirically adequate science (Wylie 2003; Intemann 2010, 791-2).

Intemann regards feminist standpoint’s justification for diversity to be stronger than feminist empiricism’s because it provides a highly plausible argument for better science, it does so on empiricist grounds that feminist empiricists ought to find palatable, and because of the weaknesses in feminist empiricism’s alternate justification. Intemann criticizes feminist empiricism for reasons near identical to my criticism of mainstream feminist empiricism (Goldenberg 2013) as well as Clough’s challenges to Longino’s influential feminist empiricist prescriptions (Clough 2003a; 2003b). Specifically, Intemann faults feminist empiricism for offering an instrumental account of values, where values are not evaluated (or evaluable) for their content, thereby making the presence of arbitration by a community holding a wide variety values necessary for negotiating the values present in scientific reasoning. Like Clough, Elizabeth Anderson (2004), and me, Intemann is convinced that feminist values “are better supported, or warranted” by the evidence (Intemann 2010, 793). Here Intemann offers an additional strength of feminist standpoint theory’s account of diversity for feminist science: it establishes the positive role of feminist contextual values in science (ibid.).

Intemann’s criticism of feminist empiricism strikes me as absolutely correct except in its ascription of the same problematic epistemic commitments to *all* feminist empiricists. Instead, they apply to the dominant “community-based social knowledge” stream of feminist empiricism and not the “values as evidence” variant that I support. She wrongly cites Anderson and Clough as examples of the feminist empiricists that she finds problematic, when in fact they have attended to her very concerns. Both feminist standpoint theory and “values as evidence” feminist empiricism share the strength (over mainstream feminist empiricism) of ostensibly establishing a positive role for feminist ethics and political values.

But we can draw Intemann’s criticisms of feminist empiricism further to challenge “values as evidence” feminist empiricism as well—specifically over the diversity criterion. We see that both “values as evidence” feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory ostensibly establish the strengths of feminist values in science. But the former does so at the expense of diversity, while the latter supports diversity as part of its

epistemic framework. Thus perhaps Intemann's suggestion is still correct that the standpoint position on diversity is the better corrective to the problem with value arbitration in mainstream feminist empiricism, which is the very problem that motivated the "values as evidence" corrective from the start. This consideration is examined by Clough in her response paper to me (2013a).

Clough is unhappy with her own and my endorsements of the *right* values rather than the right composition of people within epistemic communities, even though this move corrects problems for feminist empiricism. She does not want to weaken the normative force of the diversity criterion for good science and she is able to provide new empiricist grounds for doing so (2013a, 2013b). She challenges me to adopt the same prescription because, although I am correct to highlight the difficulty of attaining these ideal communities, the ideal is both consistent with and supported by "the same empirical commitment to feminist values that [Goldenberg] endorses for inclusion in biomedical decision-making and that she imagines will be palatable to biomedical researchers" (Clough 2013a, 74).

Clough brings the problem of underrepresentation of women and other marginalized groups in science to bear on both of our empirical commitments by suggesting that "inequity is rightly characterized as empirical failure" (2013a, 74). The failure is in considering "the weight of best evidence currently available regarding... what kinds of bodies are capable of good biomedical research" (ibid). If a research community systematically excludes women and other underrepresented groups, empirical damage is done because "discrimination against particular kinds of bodies [are done for] reasons known to be irrelevant to skill in biomedical research" (ibid). Inequity thereby hinders good science by presumably keeping some of the most talented and capable researchers from producing excellent work. But the damage goes deeper: a scientific community that follows inequitable hiring and funding practices is compromised by its failure to uphold its own empiricist commitments.

Marginalizing and discriminatory practices represent "an epistemic failure" because their justification fails the test for empirical adequacy. Feminist researchers have collected ample evidence that underrepresented groups in science are not marginalized due to any cognitive or practical failings characteristic of their members. Discrimination based on, say, race and gender thereby fails to meet science's own standard of empirical adequacy by misrepresenting who is most capable or incapable of participating in organized science.

Similar to Intemann's standpoint defense, Clough enlarges the diversity criterion to do more than promote feminist political commitments. Both tie diversity—on empiricist grounds—to better science. All scientists should therefore support diversity regardless of whether they hold feminist political leanings. But Clough's empiricist defense is stronger than Intemann's because only Clough successfully establishes the epistemic strength of feminist values. As Clough (2013b) points out, Intemann's precise justification for

feminist values being epistemically superior to sexist values is somewhat unclear. Intemann proposes that diversity is important for scientific inquiry because it allows for “representation of historically under-represented social groups whose experience might be relevant to the particular research context” (Intemann 2010, 792). The relevant empirical evidence provided, say, in support or against certain background assumptions, then, seems to lie in the life experiences of those epistemically advantaged groups, rather than in feminist values themselves. Clough, in contrast, makes the case for the feminist value of equity *itself* being a well-supported empirical claim.

Conclusion

By holding both me and herself to our own empiricist standards, Clough made a novel case for diversity in scientific communities. The prior feminist empiricist prescription for diversity was rightly rejected because it was poorly justified. The new feminist empiricist account stands on firmer ground. We know that our values and political beliefs “get their meaning and persuasive force in reference to the empirical conditions that give rise to those beliefs” (Clough 2013b, 128). We can therefore demonstrate the epistemic strengths of equity and justice over the values that govern current inequitable policies within scientific communities. While my previous arguments regarding the difficulty of establishing idealized epistemic communities and their nonnecessity for arbitrating between competing values still hold (Goldenberg 2013), the normative argument can be made that scientists still ought to deploy resources to creating diverse communities in the interest of furthering good science.

By grounding feminist values in the empiricist standards that scientists support, a strong case is made for scientists to pay attention to feminist values. Rather than needing to convince scientists that feminist values are good *political* additions to the organization of science, I can continue to demonstrate the utility of feminist interventions in science (as I did regarding clinical decision-making in (2013)). By supporting the cognitive values that scientists accept, this investigation into the diversity criterion makes a compelling case for policy change. It also furthers the broader feminist empiricist conviction that feminist social and political contributions are “co-constitutive with the epistemic project of increasing the empirical adequacy of biomedical [and other forms of scientific] research” (Clough 2013a, 75).

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