Changing Norms of Argumentation

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What strategies do social actors use to try to change norms of argumentation, and why do they expect those strategies to work? I submit that the normative structure of strategies can at least partly account for why using the strategies can reasonably be expected to change norms of argumentation. To illustrate, I use normative pragmatic theory to explain how Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger" attempts to influence how academic colleagues respond to her anger.

KEYWORDS: anger, Audre Lorde, Black feminism, normative pragmatics, teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

How can social actors change norms of argumentation? On one hand, a wholly conceptual approach has not yielded a satisfactory answer. Asking what rules ought to regulate discussion about rules defers the question indefinitely. On the other hand, a difficulty with a wholly empirical approach, where scholars recommend norms based on observation of actual practices, is that "getting from what people typically do to what they ought to do requires a leap" (Tracy, 2011, p. 172). Alternatively, we could define the argumentation scholar's task as "just to describe a certain system of discussion rules and [. . .] not include the description of rules that govern the decision to select the very system he describes" (Krabbe, 2007, p. 240).

Given that "[m]any decisions on how to interact are themselves taken interactively" (Mercier & Sperber, 2017, p. 185), another approach is to analyze strategies social actors use to try to change norms of argumentation. The starting points of this approach include the following. First, as theorizing is itself a communication practice, so is communication practice theorizing (Craig, 1996; Jacobs & Jackson, 2006). Second, communication design is apparent at all levels, even in informal conversations (Jackson & Jacobs, 1980). Third, design principles inherent in acts of communication are theories of

communication (Aakhus, 2007; Jackson & Aakhus, 2014). I submit that the normative structure of strategies can at least partly account for why using the strategies can reasonably be expected to change norms of argumentation.

To support that claim, I first explain how to describe the normative structure of a strategy. I then analyze the primary strategy used in a well-known, exemplary attempt to change a norm of argumentation: teaching. I argue that undertaking and discharging responsibilities incurred just by openly, deliberately intending to teach a norm of argumentation, creates practical reasons for addressees to make efforts to learn the norm.

2. NORMATIVE PRAGMATICS

A well-established method for describing the normative structure of strategies is normative pragmatics (e.g., Goodwin, 2001; Goodwin & Innocenti, 2019; Innocenti & Miller, 2016; Jacobs, 2000; Kauffeld, 1998; Kauffeld & Innocenti, 2018).[1] The normative structure of strategies refers to responsibilities undertaken in the open, deliberate use of strategies. The normative structure generates pragmatic force or, put differently, creates practical reasons for addressees to respond as the speaker openly, deliberately intends.

To illustrate, consider practical reasons created by holding a "Slow" sign in a road construction zone. What is the normative structure of that strategy? By holding the sign, the worker openly, deliberately displays her intent to influence drivers to drive slowly through the construction zone. The bigger, brighter, and better-positioned the sign, the more well-designed the context for holding all accountable for not driving responsibly through the road construction zone. Other things being equal, the sign-holder cannot plausibly disclaim her intent to influence drivers to drive slowly so can be held accountable if, say, she allows red cars to speed through with impunity; and drivers cannot plausibly deny seeing or understanding the sign so can be held accountable if they speed. So holding a big, bright, conspicuous sign creates two practical reasons for drivers to pass through the construction zone slowly. Drivers can now reason: (1) the sign-holder would not risk getting somebody killed, getting herself fired or imprisoned, or getting a reputation as reckless or worse, unless she planned to meet the responsibilities she undertook by holding the "Slow" sign; and (2) to avoid killing somebody or getting fined or imprisoned, or to display an identity as a prudent, courteous driver,

[1] See Kauffeld (2009) for a discussion of the Gricean speech act theory underlying normative pragmatics.

they can drive slowly through the construction zone.[2] Notice the sign-holding strategy here is not reason-giving; the words on the sign are not "Drive slowly because you do not want to kill a construction worker." Instead, the normative structure of sign-holding creates practical reasons.

The same basic story accounts for why using other kinds of communication strategies—speech acts like commands, and non-discursive features like size and color—can reasonably be expected to influence addressees as the speaker openly, deliberately intends. The more conspicuous the strategy, the greater the possibility of holding speaker and addressees accountable for failing to live up to responsibilities incurred by using the strategy, so the stronger the practical reasons created.

Pragmatic force is not compulsion. Social actors routinely act ingeniously to avoid, overcome, dismantle, replace, structures guiding or impeding action, including material structures such as a border wall and the normative structure of speech acts such as promising or warning. Normative pragmatic theory explains moral, ethical affordances and constraints created by communicatively designed contexts.

3. METHOD

To address the question of how social actors can change norms of argumentation, I analyze an exemplary attempt to influence addressees to begin having a discussion at all. In "The Uses of Anger," Audre Lorde tries to influence white women to respond to Black women's anger about racism not by disengaging from dialogue due to fear or guilt but by "recognizing the needs and the living contexts of other women" (2007, p. 126); Lorde notes, "Any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger" (2007, p. 128). This is just one norm she attempts to change; I discuss just this one because of its significance and for the sake of time. Lorde is trying to change the rules of the game, so to speak—to constrain white women from dismissing with impunity Black women's anger about racism as killing the mood, creating guilt, disrupting discussion, and more, and

[2] This practical reasoning accounts for why a speaker can reasonably expect using a strategy to influence addressees as intended. A sign-holder's internal cognitions may differ. If asked, she may say she is holding the sign because her boss told her to or because she has an injury preventing her from performing other road construction tasks. But the normative structure of the strategy nonetheless creates a context where she can be held accountable for allowing red cars to speed with impunity.

instead get them to engage Black women's arguments (2007, pp. 127, 131, 132; see also Cooper, 2018; Griffin, 2012; Olson, 2011).

Lorde's immediate audience comprised primarily academics and white women, Black women, and women of color attending her keynote address at the 1981 National Women's Studies Association conference, the theme of which was "Women Respond to Racism." Presumably they would not want to display, perpetuate, or exacerbate racism. That same year Lorde published the essay in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and then in 1984 published it in a collection of her speeches and essays entitled *Sister Outsider*. The ongoing resonance of Lorde's essay with feminist advocates and thinkers (e.g., Cooper, 2018; Howes & Hundleby, 2018) indicates widespread recognition that it is a fitting response to dissent about how white women ought to respond to Black women's anger about racism.

Because normative pragmatic theory assumes social actors self-regulate their communication practices and that rationales for persuasion are inherent in their messages (Jacobs, 2000), researchers analyze messages for both strategy and metadiscourse about how strategies are designed to work. Strategies can be identified from the macro- to micro-level: uses of argument may be subordinate to some master speech act (Jacobs, 1989; Kauffeld, 1998), and stylistic devices from word choice to sentence structure to broader units of composition, or images such as a border around an advertisement, contribute to the overall persuasive design of messages (Fahnestock, 2011; Jacobs, 2000). Lorde's essay is a vivid, conspicuous sign directing action for avoiding the perpetuation and exacerbation of racism.

4. INTENT AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Lorde's many references to teaching and learning in the essay display her intent to teach white women how to respond to Black women's anger about racism; in this case teaching is a master speech act. But Lorde does not intend the essay "to be merely another case of the academy discussing life within the closed circuits of the academy" (2007, p. 127). She openly intends to teach civic action.

Teaching involves responsibilities not incurred by using other kinds of strategies. For example, Lorde does not incentivize by, say, offering a cookie. Lorde even disclaims responsibility for persuading or, as she puts it, "for altering the psyche of her oppressor, even when that psyche is embodied in another woman" (2007, p. 133). What responsibilities does Lorde undertake by teaching?

First, Lorde undertakes responsibility for the primary intent of getting addressees to try to learn. It would be incoherent to say, "I intend to teach you how to respond to Black women's anger about

racism, but I am indifferent about whether you learn how to respond." If Lorde could plausibly disclaim that intent, then addressees could avoid learning with impunity, perhaps by just admiring Lorde's literary prowess.

But simply making declarative statements about what addressees should learn in order to get them to learn would be comparable to simply making declarative statements about what addressees should believe in order to get them to believe. Social actors routinely use additional strategies to get addressees to believe, learn, and so on. They can use any number of strategies to teach: arguing, illustrating, explaining, demonstrating, and more. A central strategy Lorde uses is "speak[ing] about anger, my anger, and what I have learned from my travels through its dominions" (2007, p. 127). Lorde says she speaks about her experiences in part because she does "not want this to become a theoretical discussion" (2007, p. 124).

5. DISCHARGING TEACHING RESPONSIBILITIES

By speaking about her experiences, Lorde vividly, conspicuously discharges four responsibilities undertaken in teaching. For the sake of time, I mainly focus on the opening of Lorde's essay where she lists eight experiences involving interactions with white women. The experiences are designed to show that "Women responding to racism means women responding to anger" (2007, p. 124).

5.1 Responsibility to know what you are talking about

First, Lorde undertakes responsibility to know what she is talking about. It would be incoherent to say, "I intend to teach you how to respond to Black women's anger about racism, but I don't know anything about that topic."

Lorde discharges that responsibility in part by listing her experiences. She begins with this one: "I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, 'Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you'" (2007, p. 125). The penultimate example Lorde lists is this: "A white academic welcomes the appearance of a collection by non-Black women of Color. 'It allows me to deal with racism without dealing with the harshness of Black women,' she says to me" (2007, p. 126). These are just two of the experiences Lorde lists, analogous to holding up a "racism" sign, to create a context where all can be held accountable for failing to know what they are talking about.

First, because addressees can now hold Lorde accountable if she does not know what she is talking about, they can reason that Lorde

would not risk her credibility unless she had made efforts to understand racism. Second, addressees can now be held accountable for not knowing what they are talking about. If white women were to say, "Those statements aren't racist. You are misunderstanding us"—not a far-fetched possibility given that Lorde also speaks about an experience asking a white woman what a week-long forum on Black and white women has given to her and the woman says, "'I think I've gotten a lot. I feel Black women really understand me a lot better now; they have a better idea of where I'm coming from,'" about which Lorde comments, "As if understanding her lay at the core of the racist problem" (2007, p. 125)—they would risk displaying just the sort of "defensiveness" that Lorde describes as one reason why Black women are angry about racism. Lorde describes defensiveness as one of the "bricks in a wall against which we all flounder" (2007, p. 124) and as "destructive of communication" (2007, p. 130). A defensive response is a fallible sign of "not dealing with" and "preserving racial blindness, the power of unaddressed privilege, unbreached, intact" (2007, pp. 131, 132). To avoid that criticism, addressees can try to learn.

5.2 Responsibility to understand what addressees do not understand

A second responsibility Lorde undertakes by teaching is to have made efforts to understand what addressees do not see, know, or understand. It would be incoherent to say, "I intend to teach you how to respond to Black women's anger about racism, and I believe you know how to respond."

Listing the eight experiences vividly displays that Lorde understands what white women do not see or understand. For example, she speaks about hearing "on campus after campus, 'How can we address the issues of racism? No women of Color attended.' Or, the other side of that statement, 'We have no one in our department equipped to teach their work,'" and comments, "In other words, racism is a Black women's problem, a problem of women of Color, and only we can discuss it" (2007, p. 125). In addition, Lorde speaks of a time when at a supermarket a little white girl exclaims about Lorde's two-year-old daughter, "'Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!' And your mother shushes you, but she does not correct you. And so fifteen years later, at a conference on racism, you can still find that story humorous. But I hear your laughter is full of terror and dis-ease" (2007, p. 126). After listing experiences, Lorde directly addresses "the white women present who recognize these attitudes as familiar" (2007, p. 127). By speaking of "familiar" experiences and their pervasiveness, Lorde displays that she understands what will sound familiar and can even anticipate how some

will respond. Now all can be held accountable for failing to accurately gauge addressees' understanding.

First, addressees can now hold Lorde accountable if she insults their moral, ethical intelligence, so can reason that Lorde would not risk their resentment unless she had made efforts to understand what they do not see, know, or understand. Second, addressees can now be held accountable for not recognizing or acknowledging their own ignorance, or for avoiding self-scrutiny and consideration of how they support racist structures not of their own making. Lorde's list of illustrations makes the risk serious as she displays the systemic pervasiveness of racism in popular media and everyday interactions by saying, for example, "You avoid the childhood assumptions formed by the raucous laughter at Rastus and Alfalfa, the acute message of your mommy's handkerchief spread upon the park bench because I had just been sitting there, the indelible and dehumanizing portraits of Amos 'n Andy and your daddy's humorous bedtime stories" (2007, p. 126). If white women dismiss Lorde's message as something they already know in order to attend to their own oppression, they risk the kind of criticism Lorde displays when she asks, "What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?" (2007, p. 132). To avoid that criticism, addressees can own their ignorance and try to learn.

5.3 Responsibility to understand addressees' constraints

A third responsibility Lorde undertakes by teaching is to have made efforts to understand and appreciate constraints inhibiting learning. It would be incoherent to say, "I intend to teach you how to respond to Black women's anger, and I do not know or care how that may be difficult for you."

By listing experiences, Lorde conspicuously shows she recognizes constraints white women face in learning how to respond to Black women's anger about racism. For example, she writes: "I have seen situations where white women hear a racist remark, resent what has been said, and become filled with fury, and remain silent because they are afraid" (2007, p. 127). In addition, she writes about a time when she experienced the anger of a woman of color:

> The woman of Color who is not Black and who charges me with rendering her invisible by assuming that her struggles with racism are identical with my own has something to tell me that I had better learn from, lest we both waste ourselves fighting the truths between us. [. . .] And yes, it is very difficult

> to stand still and to listen to another woman's voice delineate an agony I do not share, or one to which I myself have contributed (2007, pp. 127-128).

By displaying vivid signs of understanding constraints white women face in learning to listen to Black women's anger about racism, Lorde designs a context where all can be held accountable for misunderstanding constraints to learning.

First, addressees can hold Lorde accountable if she fails to appreciate the difficulties they face and alienates them, so can reason that Lorde would not risk their resentment and give them reasons for turning away and not listening to her unless she had made efforts to understand their constraints. Second, addressees can now be held accountable for not making efforts to overcome their difficulties in listening to Black women's anger about racism. Lorde displays anger and resentment that her efforts and the efforts of other people of color are not reciprocated when she writes, "Oppressed peoples are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity. Black women are expected to use our anger only in the service of other people's salvation or learning. But that time is over" (2007, p. 132). Lorde displays that failure to learn how to respond to anger about racism begets further anger about not living up to a reciprocal responsibility of meeting her efforts to understand their constraints—for perpetuating and exacerbating racism and injustice. To avoid criticism for moral apathy and perpetuating the problem, addressees can try to learn.

5.4 Responsibility to understand addressees' interests

A fourth responsibility Lorde undertakes by teaching is to have made efforts to understand addressees' interests in learning. It would be incoherent to say, "I intend to teach you how to respond to Black women's anger about racism, and I cannot say why it is in your interest to learn that."

Lorde openly takes responsibility for understanding addressees' interests when she writes at the beginning of the essay that guilt and defensiveness in response to Black women's anger about racism "serve none of our futures" (2007, p. 124). She discharges that responsibility by speaking about her experiences: "We have had to learn to move through them [furies] and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive" (2007, p. 129). She also writes about experiences that all of them share as she displays that "It is not the anger of Black women which corrodes into blind, dehumanizing power, bent upon the

annihilation of us all" (2007, p. 133). Lorde describes the "context of opposition and threat" (2007, p. 128) they all work in. She mentions "the size and complexity of the forces mounting against us and all that is most human within our environment" (2007, p. 128). She describes "the pressing need to make clear choices" and "the approaching storm that can feed the earth as well as bend the trees" (2007, p. 130). She singles out "the teeth of a system for which racism and sexism are primary, established, and necessary props of profit" (2007, p. 128). Lorde displays vivid signs that create a context where all can be held accountable for acting in their own interests.

First, addressees can hold Lorde accountable if she fails to understand their interests, so can reason that Lorde would not risk their resentment for alienating them or wasting their time unless she had made efforts to understand what is in their interests. Second, addressees cannot say it is not in their interest to learn how to respond to anger about racism without risking criticism for imprudence. Lorde raises the stakes from acting imprudently to a serious moral failure for endangering Black lives and the planet. To avoid criticism for participating in oppression, wasting energy, and endangering Black lives and the planet, addressees can make efforts to learn.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In sum, Lorde uses the strategy of teaching to change a norm of argumentation. Specifically she uses teaching to change how white women respond to Black women's anger about racism, from fear and guilt to recognizing the needs and living contexts of other women. She conspicuously puts herself in a position where she can be held accountable if she falls short in meeting responsibilities undertaken just by teaching, and at the same time creates a context where addressees can also be held accountable if they fall short in meeting reciprocal responsibilities to try to learn. The more she puts herself out there—the more conspicuously she displays she knows what she is talking about, understands what it is that addressees do not understand, appreciates constraints inhibiting addressees' learning, and understands their interests in learning—the better she creates a context where addressees can be held accountable for not meeting reciprocal responsibilities—such as knowing what they are talking about and owning their ignorance—so the more practical reasons addressees now have to try to learn.

Of course even the best teaching cannot compel anybody to learn. Addressees may choose to accept the risks of not learning, or call out what they see as the speaker's ignorance or blind spots, or explain

why learning something is not in fact in their interest, and more. But the more a speaker displays that she has met responsibilities undertaken just by teaching, the more addressees become accountable for failing to make reciprocal efforts to learn, so the more practical reasons addressees now have to try to learn. This normative structure explains why Lorde's teaching could reasonably be expected to change a norm of argumentation. The strong normative structure also explains why the essay is a touchstone for Black feminism. These findings show that normative pragmatic theory offers a promising approach to opening discussion about how to change norms of argumentation.

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