

Working on the “Jagged Edge”: Reflections on Thorne and Chinn

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Sally Thorne’s and Peggy L. Chinn’s thoughtful and provocative papers have set the standards quite high for our ability as editors to engage in “global conversations.” Sally asks us to self-consciously examine the ways in which we unwittingly perpetuate postcolonial assumptions and power relationships; and Peggy wants us to practise humility as we seek to understand and respect “centres” or perspectives that are not our own. As the editor of *Nursing History Review*, I have long thought about the ideas and practices that construct a “global conversation,” and their papers have given me much more about which I need to think. The *Review* is a small, highly specialized journal that — for the 21 years of its existence — has deliberately (and somewhat successfully) sought an interdisciplinary and international audience. But we have reached only some of our colleagues across the globe.

My remarks, however, are framed by my background as a historian as much as they are by that as an editor. And, like Sally’s and Peggy’s, my work is steeped in colonial and postcolonial paradigms. But, as a historian, I am also seeing how the notions of hierarchical and hegemonic power relationships within these paradigms are beginning to fracture. We are realizing that those labelled “others” within these paradigms see their own sources of power in adopting particular Western ideas and that their adoption is less a capitulation than a careful calculus. We are also seeing how there is rarely wholesale or uncritical adoption of particular Western practices — particular times and places lend themselves to careful reconstructions of “best practices.” And we now understand how the “other” affects the “metropole” — that there is a diffusion of ideas and practices. I am thinking particularly of Jonathan Cole’s work on nursing and midwifery in colonial Senegal (Cole, in press). The French colonial government developed maternal and public health policies that trained Senegalese women in Western nursing and midwifery. But Senegalese women participated because their education allowed them to challenge the patriarchal hierarchy in which they lived and to empower themselves with a new identity as a professional.

What does this mean to us in our role as editors? I was urged to be provocative — so I will be. First, I think it means we must unpack the implicit assumption that the process of knowledge production and dis-

semination is *only* an intellectual process among a global audience committed to the creation of knowledge for disciplinary practice. It is an important — perhaps even a primary — process. But knowledge production is as much a social and political (and — in some parts of the world — religious) process as it is an intellectual one. We know from history that what gets produced, with what resources, and under what priorities is a very messy, at times incoherent, yet very carefully calibrated set of negotiations among actors with very different sources of power.

I think my historical example also urges caution in characterizing those in non-Western and perhaps under-resourced areas of the globe as less powerful. And, finally, I think it means not privileging outcomes (of a beautifully constructed data-based manuscript) as the only marker of scholarship. It means creating a space where process may be privileged in a global conversation as well.

How might we make this happen? Again — provocatively — we need to accept that English is now the near-universal language of global scholarship. It was not always so: It was once Latin, more recently German. And it may not be so in the future. We need to think about what kinds of resources we can put into translation efforts.

And we need to use the power inherent in our roles as editors. Marion Broome, in her introductory remarks, noted our role in “stewarding the integrity of our individual journals.” And I completely agree that this is our essential role. We do have to privilege what I would call the standard manuscript form (one with a clear statement of the problem, review of the literature, methods, data and analysis, and discussion if a quantitative study). I once struggled with wanting to publish a manuscript with fascinating data — but with no analysis. A senior member of my editorial board — to whom I turned for advice — was very clear: What I published would set the norms for good historical research for all other authors seeking to understand historical methods. I did not publish the paper but suggested the author seek an historian co-author.

But if we privilege this particular form, does that mean we must inevitably privilege it as the *only* form of scholarship? The editors of the *Journal of Women's History* — also committed to the idea of more global conversations and to conventional scholarly articles — have a long tradition of experimenting with different kinds of scholarly production in different and well-demarcated sections. In the *Review*, I have created a “Notes and Documents” section, which allows me the flexibility to bring to my particular audience that which I think is important if non-conventional. What if we made a place for a selected group of authors from around the globe to answer some carefully crafted questions on such topics as HIV/AIDS, end-of-life care, nutrition, or community-based systems of care?

But, and in addition to our responsibility to our journals, we also have a responsibility to our audiences. We all know who our audiences are and what they expect from us. There is an inevitable tension in our editorial role. We think we know what we want but we have to wait for them to produce it. What we do not capture is the process of our authors working on what one historian has called the “jagged edge”: that very unsettled, de-centred, and often uncomfortable place where ideas are discussed and debated, not merely presented as formal papers at scholarly conferences. In the end, a more global conversation will require time — time to work on language, ideas, discussions, and debates. Time much like what we have here at INANE today.

References

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