Can We Disagree without Being Disagreeable?

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how to become a critic

• Read it (a paper of interest and related materials).
• Follow the exposition completely.
• Read it again critically.
• Reproduce the analysis.
• Ask yourself whether the conclusions follow from the evidence.
• If there are problems, ask yourself whether it is worth sharing what you have learned.
why are critiques and responses popular?

• “Economic”
  – Controversy attracts attention

• Procedural
  – Fun to read
  – Pointed and emotional
  – Pit well-known figures against one another
  – No retreat
  – Winners and losers

• Substantive
  – Often at the frontier of scientific fields
  – Possibly instructive
a guide to the next few pages

- * = item defended in print
- * = uninvited critique
- * = invited discussant
- * = book review essay
- “Nothing” indicates a debate with indeterminate boundaries.
a personal history of debate

- “Context and consex: A cautionary tale”
- “On ‘social participation and social status’”
- “On ‘unmeasured variables in path analysis’”
- “Inequality on occupational status and income”
- “On Boudon’s model of social mobility”
- “Response errors ... in models of the stratification process”
- “A structural model of the mobility table”
- “On ‘a reconceptualization of school effects’”
- “On ‘inequality in the military’”
- “Birth order and educational attainment in full sibships”
- “On ‘stratification in a dual economy’”
a history of debate, cont.

- “Occupational status in the 19th and 20th centuries”
- “Response variability in self- and proxy reports of paternal and filial socioeconomic characteristics”
- “Comparative social mobility revisited”
- “Sibling resemblance and inter-sibling effects on educational attainment”
- *“Anomalous mobility tables”
- *“Reinventing the oxcart”
- *“A child’s garden of equations”
- *“Understanding black-white differences”
a history of debate, cont.

- “A note on two models of sibling resemblance”
- “How not to measure intergenerational occupational persistence”
- “Symmetry and hierarchy in occupational mobility”
- “Trends in black-white test score differences”
- “On The Bell Curve”
- “Occupational status, education, and social mobility in the meritocracy”
- “Measuring socioeconomic status in studies of child development”
- “Better rules for better decisions”
- “Should we end social promotion?”
- “Socioeconomic status and health at midlife”
- “Two studies of academic achievement”
a history of debate, cont.

- *“On ‘school accountability in California’”*
- “Alcohol use and cognition at midlife”
- *“About On the Success of Failure”*
- *“The construct validity of Ryff’s scales of psychological well-being”*
- *“Another look at the stratification of educational transitions”*
what can we learn from this list?

- Not all debates are explicit exchanges between specific parties
- A participant may be
  - Initiator
  - Invited discussant
  - Responder
- And those roles differ
- Some debates create solidarity and respect between the parties
initiating an exchange, 1

• Is it important?
  – Talk to others before you invest your time, but
  – Beware incitement by others, especially by editors
  – Is your criticism original?
initiating an exchange, 2

• What is likely to be the result?
  – Will it benefit the field? How much of the field? How?
  – Will it become personal, or too personal?
  – Is the scope large enough for a research note or a paper, rather than a “critique”?
initiating an exchange, 3

• Are you right?
  – Is it about something? Or about someone?
  – Have you covered all of the bases? (“Be careful how you step in those pies”)
  – Take the part of the other
    • Sympathy or empathy
    • Reductio ad absurdum
reductio ad absurdum

- reductio ad absurdum n., pl. -ones ad absurdum. Disproof of a proposition by showing that it leads to absurd or untenable conclusions.
Social support

- Ask your friends and colleagues to read your critique.
- Send it to the subject(s) before you submit it, but only after you have checked your work.
- Do not assume that he/she/they will respond before publication.
- Take informal responses seriously.
- Where error is admitted, let the subject correct it.
initiating an exchange, 5

- Take your chances ...
  - Think about the venue
  - Be sure that all parties understand and agree upon the rules
  - A cardinal rule: Assume that you cannot change your critique once you have submitted it for publication without permission of the subject(s).
invited discussion

• See “initiating an exchange”

BUT

• Also, you have a particular responsibility to elucidate both the strengths and weaknesses of the research.
how not to respond to criticism

• Take it personally (or reply *ad hominem*)
• Offer unsupported global assertions
• Change the subject
• Blame it on someone or something else
  – The research assistant
  – That pesky computer (or computer program)
  – The codebook can’t be wrong
  – Outliers don’t matter
  – Retirement
  – That fire or theft
  – That correlation matrix would reveal the identity of research participants
  – That critic, or, worse yet, that “methodological critic”
• Theory trumps data
• Threaten legal action
how to respond to criticism

• Take your time.
• You are under no obligation to help a critic, but it is worthy to do so.
• Praise costs you nothing.
• Share data.
• Defend only what needs defense.
• Put in the work up front.
• Take the part of the other.
• Admit error.
one last word

• It’s not about you.

• It’s not about them.

• It’s about the science.