

Scholarly Disputes

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Learning by Doing is a Tough Way to Learn about Professional Disputation

“A burnt hand is a good teacher ...”

--Proverb of unknown origin

“but it makes everyone hate school.”

--Ross M. Stolzenberg



The Bottom Line

“Be nice or be nothing”

-- Advice to Amos von Hugelhaus

“Human sacrifice didn’t work for the
Aztecs and it won’t work for us”

-- Advice to myself



What is a scholarly dispute?

- *Reportage of scholarship* is a public assertion of findings, facts or opinions about the recognized subject of a discipline, by a scholar, in a *recognized forum for dispute*. E.g. A journal article or a meeting presentation
- *Dispute* is a contest about the truth of a report of scholarship



So there are Three Steps to the Construction of Scholarly Dispute

1. *Public* assertion in a *recognized forum* for dispute by a person who has standing to use the forum.
- 2A. *Public contradiction of that assertion* by another *scholar*, in a *recognized forum* for dispute
or
- 2B. *Public condemnation of the conduct* of the first scholar in a *recognized forum*.
3. A *public defense* of the original assertion or the original conduct, *in a recognized forum*.



Kinds of Disputes

Substantive Disputes
about research

Moral or Ethical Disputes
assertions of misconduct



Moral or Ethical Disputes (assertions of misconduct)

- Most serious
- Must be resolved, usually officially, often in court
- Professional fatality for accused if sustained
- Professional fatality for accuser if not sustained
- Sometimes mis-used as a weapon in substantive disputes
- ***Not my subject today***



Substantive Disputes (about research)

Assertions of errors of omission

- The least serious, because nobody can do everything
- Citation Classics:
 - “You should have controlled for X”
 - “You should have cited my book”

Assertions of errors of commission

- Citation classics:
 - “You treated the md codes as variable values”
 - “You used the wrong test”



Where do disputes come from?

1. They are intrinsic to science:

- Science is provisional.
 - *Findings are always replaced or modified beyond recognition.*
- Science is supposed to reject and replace itself.
 - *But everyone is not ready for the change when it comes.*



Where do disputes come from? (cont'd)

2. Cultural beliefs about the production of knowledge.

- Debate seen as a crucible in which knowledge is refined
 - *Debate believed to separate seed of truth from chaff error (The windier the better, some believe, it seems.)*
- Debate is built into the core values of society.
 - *Originally, Satan was a heavenly debating partner.*



Where do disputes come from? (cont'd)

3. New research is justified only by complaints about previous work

- “Gap” in knowledge
(i.e. nobody thought to look)
- Methodological limitation
(i.e. nobody had a good way to look)
- Absence of data
(i.e. nobody had anything to look at)



Where do disputes come from? (cont'd)

4. Occupational values of researchers favor dispute (see above).

- Scholars are socialized to value skepticism
- Enthusiasm for destructive testing of each other's assertions about . . .
 - *How to conceptualize their subject matter*
 - *How to analyze their data*
 - *What to conclude from their analyses*



Where do disputes come from? (cont'd)

5. Occupational values lead to occupational recruitment patterns

- Disputatious people are attracted to scientific fields, because their personalities generate results that are valued in these disciplines



Where do disputes come from? (cont'd)

6. The organization of academic work promotes disputation

- Debate is institutionalized in presentations at professional meetings in the person of the discussant.
- Commentary and debate are given a fast track to publication in many journals
- “New” (i.e. contradictory) results are favored for presentation, funding and publication.



Where do disputes come from? (cont'd)

7. The Process of Social Stratification in Science Generates Scientific Dispute

- Disputes are the legitimized means by which vested interests are challenged, removed from power, and replaced.
- Disputes are mechanisms by which elites circulate
- Dispute is the means of competition for scarce resources: Money, Influence, Fame, Students
- Dispute is a tool for usurpation and exclusion: Public humiliation as punishment for challengers and a warning to others
- *And so on . . .*



Where do disputes come from? (cont'd)

8. Psychopathology, alas

- Jealousy
- Personal animus
- Grief (in needless defense of the dead)
- Blood sports are popular. Some encourage others to fight.
- Poor social skills.
- Fragile egos.
- Sadists (They are abundant. Remember high school?)
- Neurotic avoidance behavior, self-treatment of depression
- Narcissism and related problems.
 - *Compare useful narcissism of those who think the world needs their ideas to nutty narcissism and paranoia of the self-obsessed.*



What disputes produce: Light and Heat

Good results (Light)

- Clarify issues so they can be addressed more effectively and efficiently in the future
- Contrast and compare methods, conceptualizations, theories, etc. so they can be used more effectively and efficiently in the future
- Cleaning the stables of
 - *untrue “facts,”*
 - *faulty methods,*
 - *dishonest “scholars”*
 - *etc.*
- Dissemination of promising ideas
- Recognition of talented people



What do disputes produce? (cont'd)

Bad results (Heat)

- Wastage of talent
- Wastage of time
- Destruction of social capital (ill will)
- Incorrect conclusions
(from an inferior defense of a superior argument)



Some guidelines

1. Adopt a constructive perspective

- Understand the benefits of debate.
- Be an optimist:
If attacked, you and your ideas will get publicity.
- Expect disputes, build skills, regard as normal & prepare
 - *Ask others to read your papers*
“Please tear this apart”
 - *Ask others to listen to your practice presentations*
“Please ask the hardest, most hostile, most unfair questions you can think of”



Some guidelines (cont'd)

2. Be clear about your goals *before attacking*

- What do you want to achieve?
 - *Getting published?*
 - *“I write to expose a lie” – George Orwell*
 - *Correcting an error?*
 - *Correcting an injustice?*
 - *Defending your work?*
 - *Defending or building your reputation?*



Some guidelines (cont'd)

3. Be clear about your goals *before defending*

- What do you want to achieve?
 - *Defense of your work?*
 - *Defense of your good name?*
 - *Correction of an error?*
 - *Correction of an injustice?*



Some guidelines (cont'd)

4. Show your good character

- **Be a compassionate accuser**
 - *See e.g. Lindgren vs Bellesile*
- **Admit your errors**
 - *If errors were inconsequential or unavoidable, you can say so (see below)*
- “Kill them with kindness”
 - *“I am grateful for this opportunity to correct an inaccuracy in my work.*
 - *“I am grateful for this opportunity to correct a misunderstanding about my work.*



Some guidelines (cont'd)

5. Know the options for *response to criticism*

- Seek advice. You can get help, or even a co-author.
- Can you respond?
 - *Explaining why you did what you did may be enough, and is probably better than no response at all*
- Must you respond?
 - *What attacks are ignorable?*
 - *What is it not ignorable?*
 - *Do you have to respond to every point?*



Some guidelines (cont'd)

5. Options for response (cont'd)

- Responses can correct outright falsehoods
 - *“I regret that my writing permitted misinterpretation. I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify my original statement.”*
 - From my own experience: *“I’d like to apologize for not writing clearly enough. I never would have made the mistakes just attributed to me. So it must be that I failed to make clear what I did do in this paper. Let me just say again very briefly what I did and did not do ...”*
- Responses can consider consequences of errors.
Many errors do not change the conclusions of a paper
 - *“I regret these errors. I now consider their effects.”*



Some guidelines (cont'd)

5. Options for response (cont'd)

- Respondents can communicate with critics.
 - *To request access to data, computer programs, etc.*
 - *To influence harsh tone*
“I just want to make sure that I understand what you’re saying here, since we’re going to be seeing each other at professional meetings until one of us dies or retires.”



Some guidelines (cont'd)

6. Know the options for *making a criticism*

- Private communication is *sometimes* an option
 - *Can you achieve your goals without going public?
Without embarrassing your target?
(e.g. Stolzenberg vs Greeley & Hout)*
- Spoken debate
 - *Can you respond to a discussant?
Pass session presider a note requesting to do so.*
- Published debate is governed by rules and policies.
 - *Request rules in advance.*
 - *Request rule changes as you think appropriate or necessary.*



Some guidelines (cont'd)

7. Get the rules of engagement in writing.

- The rules will be a contract.
- Can the target write a rejoinder?
- Can the critic see the rejoinder before publication?
- Can the target revise the critique after reading the rejoinder?
- Can the critic review the rejoinder for factual accuracy?
- Will anyone review the rejoinder for factual accuracy?
- How are disputes to be resolved?



Some guidelines (cont'd)

8. Never make threats or impugn character

- Threats may be extortion – *not recommended; see lawyer*
 - *The stupidest 2 words in the English language: “I’ll sue”*
- Threats tell your opponent what to do next
- Threats may make opponent overreact
- Never impugn character
 - *E.g. “You slime,” synonyms for excrement, “liar,” “Everybody knows you are scum,” “My critic is a hack,” etc.*



Some guidelines (cont'd)

9. Stay Calm

- Others will remember the emotions you display, maybe nothing else
 - *Work to achieve favorable social consequences*
 - *One wants to be known as smart, fair, slow to anger, quick to forgive, compassionate, generous, truthful, etc.*
- If unable to respond calmly, say,
“I could not possibly disagree more. I am so astonished that I don’t know where to begin, and I don’t believe that I could end in the time available. If members of the audience would please leave me their email addresses, I’ll be grateful for the opportunity to send them a written response to the criticisms just made.”



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