



Commentary

Editor:

Liam Clarke

Submission address:

School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Brighton, Robert Dodd Building, 49 Darley Road, Eastbourne, BN20 7UR, UK

The convenient myth of 'good scholarship'

I have followed with interest the ongoing debate between Liam Clarke, Poppy Buchanan-Barker and Phil Barker, ostensibly around the issue of the contribution made by Thomas Szasz to mental health nursing, but which also addresses the nature of scholarship and critique. I was, however, surprised to find my own work being referred to somewhat obliquely by Buchanan-Barker and Barker (B-B&B) as a foil to their argument for 'good scholarship'. My concern is that I have been dragged into this debate for reasons that are, to say the least, questionable, but having been implicated, I feel that I must now respond. This response, then, is twofold. I will not address the substantive debate about the work of Szasz, a task which Clarke (2009) has already undertaken, but will comment on some of the undercurrents, particularly concerning the perceived academic merit of Clarke's critique of Szasz. I will also expand on some of the issues that B-B&B raise about my own work, and attempt to place them in their proper context of an alternative position on scholarship to the view advocated by B-B&B.

At the heart of B-B&B's response to Clarke's paper is the question of whether it should even have been published, since, as they put it, his paper represents not only a failing on his own part but 'suggests an editorial failure on the part of the academic journal, which approved their publication' (B-B&B 2009, p.88). In support of their argument, they invoke the work of Elliott (2006) by claiming that Clarke has violated the 'two fundamental principles of scholarly activity, namely rigour and balance' (Elliott 2006, cited in Buchanan-Barker and Barker 2009, p.88), which B-B&B appear to have accepted uncritically and taken as being more or less axiomatic. It is with these 'fundamental principles' of rigour and balance that I will therefore begin in my critique of B-B&B's ideal of 'good scholarship'.

Rigour

It has always seemed curious to me that scholars and academics should so revere the principle of rigour. To be rigorous is to be rigid and inflexible. Whilst this is perhaps a positive quality for researchers who must adhere strictly and rigorously to certain rules and procedures in order to produce 'valid' findings, it seems to me that flexibility and responsiveness are perhaps more appropriate attributes for scholars than the felt need to 'stick to the rules' of perceived 'good scholarship'. Unlike with scientific research, there is no guarantee that rigorously following certain rules or guidelines will necessarily produce good or even valid scholarship; indeed, it could be argued that it can only result in sterile and formulaic writing, or even, as Truman Capote said of Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, not writing, but merely typing. Furthermore, whilst B-B&B call for rigorous scholarship, it is unclear exactly just what are the rules, principles and/or guidelines to which scholars should be rigorously adhering. 'Rigour', like other current buzzwords such as 'quality' and 'excellence', is an empty signifier, a word which can be lent to whatever cause we might choose.

Balance

As with rigour, balance has its place, and once again that place is in the realm of scientific research. It is, perhaps, important that empirical research studies produce balanced findings, or that systematic reviews of the literature weigh up opposing views. However, as with rigour, balance has come to be seen unquestioningly as a good thing, indeed as a 'fundamental principle' for all scholarly work. So, no more polemic; no more debate; no more papers that state one side of an argument in the hope of a spirited reply; no more Buchanan-Barker & Barker responding to Clarke and Clarke writing back in reply; no more *sparks*. I am convinced that, despite

his appeal for balance, Phil Barker would not wish to suppress sparky and spirited debate between scholars who hold opposing views. Indeed, he has himself indulged in a great deal of opinionated writing in the past and has encouraged others, including myself, to join in, for which I am hugely grateful.

But we might go further and argue that, like mental illness, academic balance is itself a myth. B-B&B (mis)quote my own work (they omit several words which distorts its meaning), where I claim that ‘the ideal of balanced critique is not itself a balanced view, but always emanates from a positioned and unbalanced power dynamic’ (misquoted in Buchanan-Barker and Barker 2009, p.93). To the extent that they *care* about what they write, academics inevitably take sides, and their own preferences and (dare I say) biases will inevitably be reflected in their writing, no matter how balanced they would like to think it is. B-B&B admire and support the views of Thomas Szasz, Clarke is critical of them (and him) and it shows in both of their papers; we might even go so far as to say that it would be dishonest of them to pretend otherwise.

Argumentum ad hominem and personal attack

Because I regard psychotherapy as a moral rather than a medical enterprise, it is reasonable to inquire into the religious origin, development, and self-identification of the founder of psychoanalysis (*Thomas Szasz, 1978, The Myth of Psychotherapy*)

For B-B&B, if authors adhere to the two ‘fundamental principles of rigour and balance’, they will avoid lapsing into personal or *ad hominem* attacks which, they claim ‘*should not be tolerated in any writing, not least academic writing*’ (Elliott 2006, cited in B-B&B 2009, their italics). The charge of *argumentum ad hominem* is sometimes used as a rebuttal to views that we do not wish to hear, particularly when they are directed against ourselves or people (and their work) whom we respect. Szasz sometimes complained that *ad hominem* arguments were used against him, and other writers have similarly accused Szasz of *ad hominem* argument, particularly in respect of Freud and Laing. *Argumentum ad hominem* derives from the discipline of philosophy and is a technical term used to describe the logical fallacy of attempting to refute an argument by discrediting the person making that argu-

ment. If, for example, I was to attempt to challenge the concept of the ego by focussing on the character of Freud, or on the fact that he was Jewish, I might be accused of an *ad hominem* attack. If, on the other hand, I was writing a biography of Freud it would be unscholarly *not* to mention his Jewishness and perfectly acceptable to explore the links between his academic work and his religious upbringing and beliefs. As we can see from the quotation at the top of this paragraph, Szasz himself appeared to understand this distinction, justifying his personal ‘attack’ on Freud by claiming that he was engaged in moral rather than scientific or logical argument. Unfortunately, the concept of *ad hominem* attack is often misunderstood and used indiscriminately to describe *any* adverse personal comment, regardless of its context or intent. Incidentally, few complaints are made against *positive* personal comments, even when they are used *in lieu* of logical argument to support the views of a particular writer.

The question that B-B&B raise, then, is whether ‘Clarke’s paper represented a personal (*ad hominem*) attack’. Allowing for the observation that, whilst all *ad hominem* attacks are by definition personal, not all personal attacks are *ad hominem*, the question hinges around whether Clarke attempted to refute Szasz’s position by personally attacking Szasz’s character or motives. I can find little in Clarke’s paper to suggest anything resembling *ad hominem* attack, which is not to say that Clarke does not, at times, touch on Szasz’s upbringing and character. For example, he cites Szasz’s eastern European origins as ‘the genesis of his detestation of collectivism and state interference’ and elsewhere suggests that it was Szasz’s intensity that made him ‘his own worst enemy’. Perhaps the closest Clarke comes to *ad hominem* attack is when he accuses Szasz of ‘cruelty’ and ‘sheer belligerence’ by suggesting that mental distress is driven by ulterior motives of self-interest. It is surprising, perhaps, that Buchanan-Barker and Barker did not pick up on this example, but chose instead to focus on a somewhat marginal point. Thus, they observe:

Clarke sought to question ‘In a nuanced way’ (Clarke 2007, p.446) the views of Thomas Szasz ‘on custodial psychiatry’, ultimately finding the man, both ‘fascinating and annoying’ (Clarke 2007, p.452). Was Clarke criticising ‘Szasz the man’, or addressing Szasz’s body of work? (Buchanan-Barker and Barker 2009, p.88)

B-B&B provide us with only a partial quotation here. What Clarke actually wrote was ‘it is Szasz’s curious inability to attach any value to alternate claims that renders him fascinating and annoying!’ B-B&B are understandably reticent to state outright that Clarke is employing *ad hominem* arguments, even though the tone of their paper would suggest that they think he is. Firstly, of course, B-B&B read ‘fascinating and annoying’ as a criticism, whereas the term ‘fascinating’ is usually used in a positive context. Secondly, it is, as B-B&B suggest, open to question whether the word ‘Szasz’ is being used to refer to the man or to his work. For example, the statement ‘Plato is difficult’ is usually taken to refer not to the man but to his writing. Similarly, ‘Szasz is annoying’ could be seen as equally referring to his work rather than to his personality. But even if we do conclude that Clarke was criticizing ‘Szasz the man’, there is still some considerable doubt as to whether this constitutes what B-B&B describe as ‘a personal (*ad hominem*) attack’.

Fairness

We finally arrive at the concept of ‘fairness’, which appears to be an amalgam of rigour, balance and refraining from *ad hominem* attack. B-B&B identify three ways in which they believe Clarke’s paper was unfair and why they felt it should perhaps have been denied publication. Firstly, Clarke was selective in his choice of references to Szasz’s work; secondly, he made ‘unfair and discourteous personal comments’ about ‘Szasz the man’; and thirdly, he ‘encouraged readers to believe that Szasz is a marginal figure of no real relevance to the contemporary world of mental health care’. I have already explained why I believe that the second of these complaints is not borne out, and I would argue that the third is a matter of contention. Clarke certainly describes Szasz as ‘off centre’ and argues that his ideas are increasingly out of step with mainstream psychiatric thought, but adds that this is precisely the reason why Szasz has been, and perhaps still is, influential. Thus:

Psychiatry owes Szasz a debt but for reasons he would not admire: his strategic rage has kept a profession too easily prone to smugness on its toes. He pushes important buttons, not least forcing psychiatry to acknowledge its role in the social containment of challenging behaviour. (Clarke 2007, p.452)

However, B-B&B’s other claim to unfairness, that Clarke was selective and extremely limited in his choice of references, bears further scrutiny. The charge brought against Clarke by B-B&B is that he used only five of the seven hundred publications listed on Szasz’s website. They ask: ‘did Clarke read all these works in preparing his critique, but felt it necessary to refer only to five of them?’ (p.88). I think we can safely assume this to be a rhetorical question, since no critic of Szasz could realistically be expected to have read all of his published output. The issue, as B-B&B suggest, is concerned not so much with what Clarke has read as with what he has referred to in his critique. I have already discussed the question of selectivity and suggested that, in the context of a critique or polemic, it is perfectly acceptable to present a partial and one-sided argument.

There is, however, a case to be made that even in his one-sided and partial critique, Clarke was nevertheless overly restrictive in his choice of references to the point of deliberate unfairness. As someone who has read only a very small fraction of Szasz’s vast output, I, like most followers of this debate, am hardly in a position to comment, and will gladly defer to scholars of Szasz such as B-B&B and Clarke to resolve this particular issue. In any case, the point of my paper is not pass judgement on whether Clarke was being fair to Szasz, but to raise questions about the *principle* of fairness; about whether it is ever possible or even desirable to present a full and fair picture, if not of the complete *oeuvre* of a prolific, wide-ranging and at times inconsistent writer such as Szasz, then at least of the particular aspect of his work that Clarke has chosen to focus on.

The convenient myth of ‘good scholarship’

I will now turn to the second aspect of my response to B-B&B. In their apparent pursuit of a fair deal for Thomas Szasz, B-B&B invoke my own work on deconstructive critique. They cite two passages from my paper (Rolfe 2006), one of which they misquote, followed immediately by a nonsense quotation by Groucho Marx from the film *Animal Crackers*. It is difficult to see the relevance of the Marx quote except as a direct comparison with my own work. As B-B&B go on to remark: ‘Groucho Marx’s convoluted reasoning might not have passed as a “deconstructive turn” but at least it was

funny' (p.94). Not wishing to be accused of lacking a sense of humour, I would nevertheless point out that it may be easier to ridicule ideas of which we disapprove, than to engage with them in a scholarly way.

B-B&B continue by expressing their dismay at my arguments against what they term 'old-fashioned' scholarship in favour of 'post-modern' critique, suggesting that I might find their views 'stuffy and not "playful" enough' (p.93). They add that:

Clarke's 'article' may be an example of Rolfe's 'new critique', dispensing with the need for 'fairness' and 'integrity' of 'good scholarship'. We don't think so. Clarke's 'snappy', intelligible and entertaining writing guarantees that his readership is much wider than ivory-tower academics playing with 'deconstructive meta-critiques'. (B-B&B 2009, pp.93–94, all inverted commas in original)

It is difficult to know what to make of this statement. I will not even bother here to defend my position against this series of sideswipes, other than to point out that by placing terms such as 'fairness' and 'integrity' in inverted commas when discussing my work, there is at least a suggestion that B-B&B quoted these terms directly from my paper. They did not. Nor did I claim that I wished to 'dispense with all the values of 'good scholarship' which B-B&B hold so dear. What I said in my paper was that the purpose of 'new critique' was to confront and deconstruct the rules of so-called 'good scholarship' rather than passively accept and reinforce them. The values of 'good scholarship' do not need to be 'dispensed with' because they begin to unravel and deconstruct themselves as soon as they are examined in a critical fashion. My point is not that the values of traditional 'good scholarship' should be dispensed with, but that they are, to paraphrase B-B&B, a 'convenient myth'.

However, I wish to question why B-B&B felt it necessary even to cite my work in the first place. Anyone who has even a passing acquaintance with Clarke's writing will know of his own disdain for 'the disturbing fooling around with "truth" of much continental philosophy' (Clarke 2008, p.694). B-B&B are surely familiar with Clarke's critical views on deconstruction, and so in raising and immediately rejecting the possibility that 'Clarke's article may be an example of Rolfe's new critique' (p.93), it is difficult to see this quotation as anything more than an opportunity for a cheap

dig at my paper. Put another way, this short diversion by B-B&B into my work on deconstruction has no bearing on their dispute with Clarke and has clearly been included for reasons known only to themselves. They continue by suggesting that, in any case, Clarke's writing is too 'snappy', entertaining and intelligible to be merely a case of the kind of 'deconstructive meta-critique' that 'ivory-tower academics' such as myself like to 'play with' (which is, by implication, unentertaining and unintelligible).

Conclusion

B-B&B strongly advocate what they call the 'old-fashioned' values of fairness, integrity and good scholarship, and complain that Clarke has violated them in his attack on Szasz. They might well be correct, although Clarke (2009) clearly does not think so. However, in the course of advocating these values, I would suggest that they have been less than fair towards my own work by citing it selectively and out of context; that is, without integrity and wholeness. I also felt that their treatment of my work has displayed a lack of civility, which B-B&B apparently consider an important academic value. Of course, I can hardly complain, since I have already stated that I consider academic fairness to be a myth. I am therefore quite prepared to accept a one-sided, unfair and perhaps even uncivil critique of my work, but not in a paper that is ostensibly concerned with advocating balance, fairness and civility. In my view, then, B-B&B either stand accused of hypocrisy or, as I would prefer to think, they have inadvertently confirmed my view that what they refer to as fair and balanced critique is simply not possible to achieve and maintain.

GARY ROLFE *PhD MA BSc RMN*
 Professor, School of Health Science
 Swansea University
 Singleton Park
 Swansea
 SA2 8PP
 Wales UK

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