**Curbing Self-Referential Writing**

Jay Gubrium

My concern with self-referential writing isn't meant to denigrate.  Rather, mine are words of caution to students not to take writing of this kind too far lest the subject matter in question not be addressed.  (Of course, the subject matter might be "itself," in which case we're back to square one, but I don't figure that this should be the main focus of an empirical science.)  By self-referential writing, I mean writing that refers mainly or exclusively to what you thought or did, or went through, in working up the empirical material that supports your account.

I have three kinds of self-referential writing in mind, which in my experience with students can turn into bad habits.  One of these is longstanding and is the habit of focusing excessively on the theoretical or conceptual contours of your work.  C. Wright Mills called attention to this when he criticized the habit he called "grand theorizing."  At the time, it focused on Talcott Parsons' writing, but it continues to apply, excruciatingly in some national contexts.  My advise to students, which I myself have had to curb in my own writing (the perennial theorist here) is to put arguments and concepts in place that inform, not eclipse, the subject matter-whether it be small scale such as family cultures or large scale such as the evolution of state welfare systems.  Yes and certainly, do continually touch base with your way of thinking or your argument as you move ahead, but don't let that overshadow your writing.  Of course, there's room for theoretical discussion and debate; this serves to clarify how we and others view what we study, its ideological and historical dimensions, and how such matters relate to empirical concerns.  But get to your story, tell it vibrantly, and above all write plainly so that it, not the framework shaping it, comes across.  Shall I offer a simple rule of thumb?  At the risk of being simple-minded, make sure that at least 75% of what you write is about what you're concerned with, not the way that is framed.

A second kind of self-referential writing centers on procedure, how you went about gathering the material to make your case.  This commonly includes how you decided which cases or what population to study, how you made contact with or otherwise selected them, how you gathered and organized the material, how you decided what was relevant, and how that was to be arranged in the text that reported your results.  These are important concerns, to be sure, but there is a form of writing that dwells excessively on such matters, to the point where what procedure is meant produce is gravely shortchanged.  Research proposals, of course, necessarily dwell on this, but they shouldn't be the final story.  Here again, the rule of thumb is to curb this form of self-referential writing so that it's not the featured item in your article, dissertation, or your book.  Yes, there should be room for methodological debate, as this too serves to clarify research.  But curb this tendency and get to the story.

A third and final kind of self-referential writing is of more recent vintage and now has its niche in social science.  This is the kind of writing that refers to the personal experience of the researcher, either emphasizing his or her thoughts and feelings over the course of a project or the development of his or her interpersonal relations with research participants.  This definitely has a place especially in the social and behavioral sciences, and now also in social studies of science.  The bad habit is that it too can eclipse writing about the subject matter in view.  I know that the subject matter can be the experience of the researcher, but what I'm concerned with here is the emphasis this can take in the final written product.  If you do aim to feature your place in a project in writing, in particular yourself and your relation with others, then write about how that relates to broader issues of personal and interpersonal experience in the circumstances.  Curb this habit so that you offer the reader a way to compare, say, what you went through with themselves and others.  Write deliberately with an eye to general understanding of the personal and interpersonal.

Well, I've stuck my neck out and, of course, risked offending my colleagues and my own and other students.  But my comments, as I've indicated, are not meant to denigrate; surely there's room for us all in social science.  My comments are offered, rather, in the spirit of taking the word "curb" seriously, which of course would include curbing the matter of curbing.

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