

On Writing About Psychological Science

February 01, 2001

Recently a friend of mine described me to his colleagues as a “journalist.” My vague irritation at this designation, which even superseded my pleasure at being called a good one, got me to thinking about the kind of writing I do, in contrast to the kind that my academic colleagues do. I realize that I have an idiosyncratic career. Unfortunately, it means that I spend half my time explaining to laypeople that I am a psychologist but not a therapist, and the other half explaining to psychologists that I am a writer but not a journalist.

Unlike the typical journalist, a writer gets to have a personal voice – to draw conclusions, to write in the first person, to express opinions with enthusiasm, sarcasm, or humor. I have never been interested in doing what most journalists do: “covering” a story as an impartial observer, reporting “both” sides even when there are more than two sides or when the sides are not remotely equal in validity. I do not have to pretend that there are two sides to such issues as whether homosexuality is a mental illness or whether cute, big-eyed aliens really are abducting Americans for exotic sexual experiments, whereas a journalist will feel obliged to interview someone like Charles Socarides (a psychoanalyst who claims he “cures” homosexuals) or John Mack (the Harvard psychiatry professor who claims abductions are real) to represent the “other” view.

When psychological scientists speak to or write for general audiences, they should take the opportunity to model the key themes of scientific and critical thinking: that what we know is inseparable from how we know it; that opinions must be based on evidence; that not all opinions have equal validity; and that science gives us probabilities – only pseudoscience gives us certainties.

A writer’s language differs from that of journalists and scientists, although those of us who write about science often find ourselves doing simultaneous translation. Scientists are exasperated by the superficiality and sound-bite mentality of many journalists. Journalists, in turn, are exasperated by the academic’s habit of speaking in probabilities and tempering every conclusion with qualifications. Indeed, the professional training of all scientists is explicitly designed to squelch the individual behind the research: hence the passive voice (“the study was designed . . .” by an Invisible Hand, presumably); the excision of emotive or inflammatory language; the careful assessment not of what the data “do” mean, but what they “suggest.” These are appropriate scientific cautions, but unfortunately they are often accompanied by linguistic characteristics that serve to mark every profession’s boundaries: “If you

don't understand what I am saying, you are not one of us." Psychology is no exception, and that is why academic language so often runs aground in foggy thickets:

"Whether abandoning the study of bodily pleasures to explore the symbolic reign of the fraudulent phallus or, distancing itself from polymorphous perversity for conventional narratives of the gender-differentiating effects of maternal attachments, the potential challenge of the infinite waywardness of infantile sexuality persisting to undermine, or at least trouble, ..."

That sentence chatters on for another 25 words, but you get the idea.

For years I have exhorted my fellow psychologists to take a stab at presenting their work in the sweet clarity of plain English, indulging themselves in the opportunity to come right out and say what they think (armed with data, of course). Now, however, I find I need to amend that advice. When scientific psychologists take the plunge into "popular" writing, they sometimes behave like newly liberated nudists, throwing caution and modesty to the winds. Freed of the worst aspects of scientific language, they abandon what is best about it. They attempt instead a breezy journalistic style, replacing the data and nuance of their research with anecdotes and generalizations. (That's the academic's impression of journalism.) They throw out the restraints of scientific language—all those qualifications, maybes, tends-tos, and probablys. Instead of taking the reader down a path of evidence and argument, they leap directly to the conclusion.

Some psychologists take this "pop-psych" direction because they have not learned the difference between writing simply and oversimplifying. But others are doing so under pressure from editors, journalists, and publishers, many of whom want scientists to oversimplify and dumb down their language. In today's antiscientific culture, which promotes simplistic solutions and elevates noisy, passionate claims above calm, reasoned argument, the cautions of science are particularly unwelcome. Only a few academic scientists, such as Stephen Jay Gould, Steven Pinker, and Daniel Dennett (and only a few scientifically sophisticated journalists, such as Natalie Angier, Dava Sobel, and Malcolm Gladwell), continue to find large general audiences and supportive publishers. Of course, these individuals are also skilled writers who can discuss complicated subjects without encrusting their prose in barnacles of jargon.

In the olden days, academics worried that if they wrote for nonprofessionals their reputation would be hopelessly tainted. Popular writing still does not enhance an academic resume, but psychological scientists increasingly understand how important it is that the public understand and support the work they do. Three recent social contagions made this lesson abundantly clear: the rise and fall of recovered memory therapy, sex-abuse scandals in daycare centers, and multiple personality disorder. These hysterical epidemics tore asunder the field of psychology and caused great harm to countless individuals and families. And they revealed that when psychological scientists leave the public arena to unscientifically minded psychotherapists and to pseudoscientists, our profession suffers. And so does the public.

All the more reason, therefore, that when psychological scientists speak to or write for general audiences, they should take the opportunity to model the key themes of scientific and critical thinking: that what we know is inseparable from how we know it; that opinions must be based on evidence; that

not all opinions have equal validity; and that science gives us probabilities – only pseudoscience gives us certainties.

I hope that more psychological scientists will learn to communicate their work to general audiences. If you do, you will discover the pleasures of expressing your own opinion and being your own expert, and you don't have to become a "journalist." Just as we need more journalists who understand science, we need more scientists who can write-as long as they do so without leaving the science part out.