

Swapping Stories in the Classroom: The Political Implications of Self-Disclosure

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My wife and I once worked in a co-ed residence at the University of Toronto. One of the building's porters, a older gentleman named Carl who has since died, worked the afternoon shift. Originally from somewhere in what we once called Eastern Europe, he had fought in World War II, for various armies. As one was defeated by another, some soldiers simply changed sides, took up with their new compatriots, and kept on going; after all, the alternative was more than likely not nearly as appealing.

Late one evening while on his rounds, he came upon a small group of undergraduate students in one of the dimly lit common rooms, confessing to one another their past misdeeds: the curfews they had missed and their high school drinking-binges. Stopping his rounds for a moment, I was told the next morning how the porter stood just outside their circle and listened. Turning to him, a young student invited Carl to divulge one of his own past infractions. Because he was old enough to be the student's great-grandfather, more than likely they all anticipated hearing some quaint, antique recollection—a confession that would enable the old man to join yet another new group of compatriots.

Instead of offering a familiar tale about the “good ole days,” Carl replied in his thickly accented English:

“In zee var ve vould burn Polish villages.”

In the complete silence that greeted his disclosure—calling his words a confession entirely misses the point of my anecdote—he turned, and, as it was told to me, walked back into the darkness to continue his nightly rounds.

Thinking of the questions put before us to consider today—questions regarding the place of self-disclosure in the classroom, let alone in our scholarly work—I cannot help but recall Carl walking out of the room after having upped the ante considerably. For those upper-middle class students were completely unprepared to entertain anyone's world as being so far removed from their own that Carl's story would be anything other than sneaking out of his room late one evening to meet a young lady. In the same manner that their late-night confessions—much like telling scary tales around a camp fire—functioned to unite them by reinforcing the boundaries of the expected and the allowable, their dumbfounded reaction to the porter's report, recounted with no hint of shame or irony, makes apparent the parochial nature of the preferences that—prior to hearing his tale, that is—they had taken for granted as universal and self-evident.

Such moments therefore remind me of the inevitably local and self-serving nature of all forms of in-group story-telling that presumes to exist some inclusive vantage point outside of interest-laden, contingent and potentially contradictory perspectives of historical agents. This is none other than the ideology of closure that, in our field, takes the forms of attempts to address what we call the insider/outsider problem—and I presume that this is precisely the issue we are discussing today. But this so-called problem of differing commitments is a problem only for those motivated by the wishful hope that there somewhere exists a detached, god's eye viewpoint from which the entire pachyderm of human meaning can somehow be experienced by carefully listening to the tales of the proverbial blind men. If this is indeed the case, if there is some big picture that we will recognize only after a considerable amount of inductive data gathering—and how to demonstrate its existence is, of course, the \$64,000 question—then I can at least understand what compels some colleagues to presume that we all have a story to tell and

thus all deserve our fifteen minutes of fame; but if there is no such beast, if the blind men are truly blind, groping without the benefit of the omniscient narrator who is required to make that proverb work, then we are disingenuous in inviting everyone to tell their story, for I suspect that—like those students in my anecdote—we are not all prepared to listen patiently and appreciatively to everyone who might come out of the darkness.

To understand the problems with this problem we should first note that there are many academic fields in which there is nothing equivalent to the insider/outsider problem that we use to mediate between what is in fact a profusion of voices. These are fields in which writers feel no guilt when they offer analyses that use participant disclosures as data that is then subjected to theoretical analysis. In once comparing the scholar of religion to the doctor whose efforts to understand the workings of the human body require no input whatsoever from the comatose patient, Robert Segal, of Lancaster University, once took an obviously provocative stand on this issue, one seldom adopted by scholars of religion for fear of offending the people whom we study. That some members of the audience at the conference where he struck upon this analogy were, to put it mildly, aghast suggests that the study of religion is not one of the fields that somehow escapes the insider/outsider problem.¹ But why is this?

The common answer draws on the sharp split between the so-called sciences of the spirit and those of nature. Inasmuch as humans are thought to possess independent consciousness, we are free, moral beings. Therefore, unlike the predictable behavior of physical objects, the study of human beliefs and actions must necessarily take into account the intentional ghost inhabiting the physical machine. An inductively-based, objective “science of man” was therefore seen by some as demeaning inasmuch as it placed people on a par with unthinking, objects. As recently

quoted by Faydra Shapiro, in an article on the intersection between ethnography and autobiography:

In trying to become ‘objective’ Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence. (2003: 193, quoting Anzaldua 1987: 37)

Because human beings are thought to act, rather than simply behave, their actions must be understood as part of a larger system of meanings. Accordingly, the study of these actions must be interpretive, not explanatory, and the participant’s understanding of their own motivations and meanings enters a dialogue with the understandings of the observer—otherwise, or so it is said, scholars will do violence to the dignity of the person under study, not to mention jeopardizing their own humanity as well.

Even if we grant this division of labor—and let me add that it is far from obvious that we ought to!—the traditional split between the sorts of objects under study (e.g., people versus things) and the methods used in their study (e.g., interpretation versus explanation) does not really help to account for why only some intellectual pursuits worry so much over having the scholar keep in touch with the participant by having them exchange self-disclosures, much as symbolic gifts are exchanged whenever we try to forge new friendships. It does not help because, as made plain in my opening anecdote, we likely don’t want to be friends with everyone and therefore we’d better be a little more explicit about how we choose our dance partners.

So long as we keep dancing with people who already know our steps, we really don’t have to be very articulate about when we do and do not make our own personal disclosures, for we likely make them all the time. And whenever someone steps on someone else’s toes while doing this consensual dance, then we can always just invoke the insider/outsider problem to

finesse the misstep (that is, to solve the problem of misunderstanding). Does this help us to understand why we would never expect to see a book entitled something like The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Nazism? For it is likely inconceivable for scholars in modern, liberal democracies to entertain that their adversaries have a legitimate opinion about themselves and their motives that is worth sharing as part of an ongoing conversation—and by “legitimate” I simply mean one that is seen to compete with, complement, or enhance the scholar’s own analysis. In fact, entertaining any of these options would, more than likely, be judged as an immoral stand, perhaps prompting some to accuse us of a seditious act of treason. Although it would be easy to draw on a contemporary example—say, the manner in which so-called Islamic fanatics’ explanations for their own violent actions are dismissed as lies, delusions, or double-speak in need of careful decoding (making those who fail to question the epistemic status of these reports mere pawns in the terrorists’ hands)—consider the case of the onetime Nazi Minister of Armaments and so-called “architect of the Third Reich,” Albert Speer—one of the few defendants to pled guilty at the Nuremberg trials and who served twenty years in Spandau prison, in what was once East Berlin, until his release in 1966. His prison memoirs hold a celebrated status for scholars but only inasmuch as Speer’s recorded self-disclosures are understood as an example of an astute political actor, working with the benefit of hindsight, to rationalize his own actions and thereby fool his obviously culpable self (and his unwary readers alike!). Such an insider’s self-report is therefore not part of an ongoing conversation with the scholar; instead, it is of interest only inasmuch as it is understood either as an example of self-delusion or evidence of the reporter apologizing for his past misdeeds.

Whether or not one agrees with how scholars have used Speer’s memoirs, we must at

least note that their goal is not to avoid doing violence to his self-disclosures—as if participants set the bar for how their behaviors ought to be understood. Instead of trying to sympathize with, empathize with, or protect his authorial voice, their goal is to explain why someone as educated and cultured as Speer would understand his own behavior in a way that differs so dramatically from how we understand it. Because we have such confidence in the superiority of our own systems of morality and our own understanding of history, no apologies are needed when our conclusions regarding self-deception trump Speer’s protestations of his well-meaning political naivete.

It would appear, then, that we have no need of this thing we call the insider/outsider problem to mediate competing disclosures and commitments when we study our enemies, for they are deluded, lying, or brainwashed. So the question arises: when does the scholarly suspension of first person interpretive authority qualify as an instance of epistemic violence and when does a failure to suspend the participant’s interpretive authority amount to an offensive or immoral act?

To answer my own question, it strikes me that the so-called insider/outsider problem is an opportunity for achieving mutual understanding only when the scholar has some sort of affinity for the behaviors under study. When addressing those beliefs and behaviors with which we disagree, we lose no sleep whatsoever when we offer an analysis that contradicts participants’ own self-understandings and suspends their right to add their voice to our conversation. For instance, pick up virtually any study of a group—other than our own, of course—that resorts to violence to accomplish its political and economic goals and, despite the best intentions of the empathetic commentator, the point of studying them is not to be in touch

with these people by conversing with them. Sooner or later the other shoe drops when the writer adopts an explanatory framework in order to determine why anyone would do such a thing.

I therefore see scholarship qua conversation, scholarship seen as an opportunity for making collegial disclosures of personal commitments, as having profound political ramifications; it is a social engineering technique used by specific groups to establish tactical coalitions by using the classroom to selectively smooth over what, for the purpose of some anticipated coalition, are perceived to be relatively minor differences, all in an effort to circle the wagons against the onslaught of the significant differences that threaten some apparent “us” and “our” interests. Recognizing and then trying to address seemingly competing commitments by means of the insider/outsider problem therefore arises only when an empirically diverse and possibly conflicting “many” is, for whatever reason, presumed by its members to be subordinated to a common, non-empirical “oneness” (call it human nature, nationality, religious experience, gender, or ethnicity). That this triumphant oneness, achieved by means of establishing mutual understanding, turns out to be anything but an inclusive conversation must not go unnoticed.

For instance, consider how all of this works in a recent British collection of essays entitled Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual. The various chapters in this book—on such diverse groups as British Muslims, New Religious Movements, Soka Gakkai in the UK, British Quakerism, and British Wicca—set about addressing the insider/outsider problem by presuming that there exists some “big picture” to which participants and observers alike have limited yet complementary access. This is phrased in the book’s conclusion as follows:

All of this is rooted in an epistemology ... in which no single ‘voice’ has the capacity for the whole truth, but in which every voice is a potential source of fact and insight, and in which valid conclusions and adequate interpretations are more likely, when the multiple voices are sensitively heard and considered.... If we can build multiple perspectives into our research project, whether through team research in the field, sharing at conferences, or other forms of collegial discourse, we are blessed. (Arweck and Stringer, 159)

However, the unelaborated qualifications that lead to this blessed event surely deserve some attention, for they provide such writers with considerable wiggle-room to accomplish two crucial things: (i) to avoid sanctioning the wrong voices and (ii) to keep anyone from noticing that they avoid sanctioning the wrong voices—in this manner we can feel rather good about how open our conversation is, all the while hearing stories that we already know by heart, for the conventions that determine the form our conversation takes preclude the wrong voices gaining entry. I am reminded here of an aside made on April 9, 2003, by a cable news commentator as the television news cameras zoomed in on the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein, on the day that U.S. troops first arrived in Baghdad. One of the risks of bringing democracy to Iraq, the pundit said, was that they might elect the wrong government. More than likely this remark went unnoticed to the majority of viewers, since we all pretty much know what the wrong government is—they’re the ones we call regimes because they don’t look like ours. His comment went unnoticed, that is, until his colleague observed that in a democracy there’s no such thing as electing the wrong government.

But usually there’s no one present to identify the manner in which those straining to hear all of the voices always slip into a self-interested monologue. After all, as noted in the earlier quotation, every voice is merely a potential source of fact and insight; conclusions can be either valid or invalid while interpretations can either be adequate or inadequate; we are told that, as

listeners, we must be sensitive and our discourse must be collegial, otherwise, I presume, we are not allowed to play the game. All too predictably, however, we find no argumentation in favor of any criteria whereby, for instance, valid from invalid conclusions can be distinguished and no suggestion as to what constitutes a collegial discourse. This should be enough to cause the wary reader to pause, especially those acquainted with the ways in which the category “collegiality” is sometimes used in the academy to assert some rather unprofessional criteria that determine ones inclusion within the guild.

This presumption that our criteria are self-evident and universal—something many of us share with those students in my anecdote—is evidence of a nostalgia for the innocence that comes with full understanding—a nostalgia for some posited totality that is greater than the sum of its individual and seemingly conflicting parts. It is a profoundly anti-historical attitude that strikes me as most troublesome in the work of those who use the insider/outsider problem to mediate between differing viewpoints and commitments. For, instead of presuming that historical existence is shot through and through with competing interests, the rhetoric of “full understanding” that propels the desire to keep in touch with the people we study and which prompts some of us to think that all so-called deeply held beliefs can find a place at the table in our classrooms, bypasses the requirements (and thus the risks) of public persuasion; in bypassing these requirements it shows itself to be based on anything but a humble epistemological foundation. Instead, it provides a passive/aggressive means to portray some local as the self-evident universal without ever really considering that interests and viewpoints might be incommensurable or contradictory. I think here of Jonathan Kirsch’s recent book, The Woman Who Laughed at God: The Untold History of the Jewish People (2001), which stands as a useful

example of a writer coming to grips with the fact that, at least in the case of Judaism, the only so-called core value is diversity and disagreement. Thus, all we seem to have is a host of differing Judaisms all talking with each other. But in making this seemingly insightful observation, we find a subtle argument that naturalizes but one sort of liberal Judaism as opposed to the many other contenders for normative status. In other words, the old “unity in diversity” nugget is a political rhetoric doing its own sort of group building in competition with other mutually exclusive conceptions of the group, some of which don’t particularly want to gain entry into the big tent.

This rhetoric of the big picture, the unity that encompasses all diversity, the synthesis that unites all opposites, in which one attains full understanding by listening carefully to all of the voices, may be one of the most powerful political techniques we’ve yet come up with to silence just some voices while amplifying others. For, as phrased in a rhetorical question posed by Slavoj Žižek in his critique of the popular film, “The Matrix”: “What if ideology resides in the very belief that outside the closure of the finite universe, there is some ‘true reality’ to be entered?” (2001: 214). For, as aficionados of this film will recall, outside the seemingly never-ending yet only virtually real matrix is a really real world—what Žižek characterizes as “the pre-modern notion of ‘arriving at the end of the universe’” (215). But rather than being as radical as many of its fans understood it to be, it is a film informed only by what Pierre Bourdieu once termed radical chic and apparent subversion (1998: 137); the “problem with the film,” according to Žižek, is that “it is not ‘crazy’ enough.... Much more subversive than this multiplication of virtual universes would have been the multiplication of realities themselves” (217). Translated into the topic under discussion today, he seems to be saying that the far more radical way to

examine the issue of differing commitments is to take seriously that there is no resolution to be had; the task of scholarship, then, is to recognize that since we'll never exhaust the voices to be heard, adding our own to the mix accomplishes nothing. Instead, we need to determine some defensible principle of selection, some criterion of focus suitable to the institutions in which we do our labors, to determine how it is that we will look into the issue of difference and what will get to count as a difference worth looking into.

I'm hoping that you now see why what Bruce Lincoln once termed sentiments of affinity and estrangement (1989: 10) ought not to function as our scholarly criteria of selection, and why it is that our role ought not to be that of nurturing identification with our objects of study through entering a dialogue with them about our deepest dreams and our ultimate concerns. With this, I return to my opening anecdote: as laudable as it may seem to invite others to leave the darkness and join our circle—and who but an uncivilized brute would be against swapping stories around the glowing campfire that we euphemistically call free market, liberal democracy—we cannot forget that huddling in our circle is not the only game in town. Moreover, I am at a loss to find anything other than self-serving rationalizations for why some social groups gain admission to our civil conversation—and, being our discourse, following our rules, it is duplicitous to portray it as a collaboration—whereas those with whom we have limited affinity, those with whom we are in outright competition, become the objects of everything from derision to state-sponsored coercive violence. Are they just so obviously wrong that we need no rationale or persuasive reason for excluding them from the big conversation? Are their interests so out of sync with reality that we need not acknowledge that our so-called dialogue is in fact a monologue efficiently reproducing our local interests under the guise of multivocality?

Sadly, such topics are never investigated in our efforts to hear everyone's story; the problem with the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion is therefore the classification "religion" itself, for it pre-selects the easy and familiar cases of meaning-making and identity-construction, enabling us to converse only with those who are already "civil," "faithful," "tolerant," "sensitive," and "collegial," thereby placing on the table personal commitments that never offend. Case in point, consider one of the positions outlined in our conference description: that some argue it is crucial to bring the students' and professor's own personal commitments into the classroom. So long as they're the "right" commitments, this is fine, of course. But what if they are not? What if you teach in a region of the U.S. where many of your students inform you that Roman Catholics are not Christians. Am I to get into a jousting match with them concerning their conception of their own group identity? Or consider a film some of us might have used in our classes or seen as students, "Footprint of the Buddha" (from the well known "Long Search" series): there is a scene in which Sri Lankan laywomen are wildly possessed by spirits as the local shrine priest authenticates their possession by hitting them and splashing them in the face with water; anyone even partially familiar with the contemplative Buddhism of our textbooks will immediately recognize that this is just the wrong sort of commitment. Where are the Five Noble Truths? Where is the sedate lifestyle that looks beyond appearances and slowly sips tea? Or consider how, beginning on September 12, 2001, the pundits began working in earnest to distance so-called authentic Islam—guided by timeless "principles" communicated by means of an apparently uniform thing we call "tradition"—from those accused of carrying out the previous day's attacks. Is it merely a coincidence that authentic Islam ended up looking an awful lot like yet another personal choice in the free market? As phrased by one such

commentator: “The challenge of the future can only be faced by an Islamic worldview that embraces diversity, equality of the sexes, and the freedom, not only to be right, but also to be wrong”—so writes Vincent Cornell, himself a Muslim and the Director of the King Fahd Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of Arkansas, in a post-September 11 essay collection entitled Dissent from the Homeland. “Failure to meet the challenges of a diverse, multicentered, and religiously pluralistic world,” he adds, “will ultimately lead to an Islam that is irrelevant to contemporary life, and might even herald the decline of Islam as a world religion” (93). After all, as he concludes: “People who appear uncivilized do not get invited into the community of nations” (92).

As with the useful rhetoric of “collegiality”—useful to tenured professors keeping their cards close to the chest when making tenure and promotion decisions, that is—such writers do not need to define just what gets to count as “right,” “wrong,” “relevant,” “civilized,” or “community,” for those of us at the campfire swapping our stories already know what they are. Much like indecency, although we couldn’t actually define the limits of each of these if we had to, we apparently know once the rules have been overstepped—as did approximately 200,000 people complaining to the Federal Communications Commission about the liberties taken with what I gather is the normally family-values nature of Super Bowl halftime shows. As this recent episode makes clear, anyone who deviates too far from our unarticulated script will suffer consequences—either symbolic or actual. In our field, trespassers are classified, and studied, and silenced as radicals, militants, extremists, and tribalists who belong to movements that are comprised of agitators and people with strident voices who are led by belligerent leaders—to borrow a few of the terms used by the well-known inclusivist Martin Marty, in his book, The

One and the Many: America's Struggle for the Common Good (1997) to brand those who are bold enough to put into practice their own thoughts on the common good.

To sum up, we can draw on the work of the French political theorist Dominique Colas, who was himself commenting on the political utility of the slippery rhetorics of “civil society” and “fanatic,” and conclude that seeing the classroom as a place where we share personal disclosures and work toward massaging difference and establishing mutual understandings is a political problem because it “tends to present political issues as problems of management rather than as conflicts between various powers and groups with divergent or antagonistic interests” (40). And it is precisely the limits of meaning and social identity that we are attempting to manage with our efforts to converse with just some others—efforts that ensure specific groups remain within arm’s reach while others are kept securely at arm’s length.

Perhaps you can now understand why I see scholarly studies that seek the goal of conversation, dialogue, self-expression, and mutual understanding to be entirely suspect: they leave their descriptive data untheorized and, leaving it untheorized, they implicitly reinforce the object of study’s status as self-evidently meaningful and sensible. Now, by “theorize” I simply mean studying all human artifacts, such as participant self-reports, as instances of data in need of historicization and explanatory analysis, and not simply appreciation or dismissal, for my role as a scholar is not to be “in touch” with the people under study, and not to feel their pain, whether or not I have affinity for them. Failing to subject the descriptive data to theoretical analysis results in simply adopting uncritically someone else’s view of themselves and their place within their world. Then, so long as it complements or enhances our own interests, we merely perpetuate it uncritically by offering our own story that serves merely as a repetition of what the

participants have already said for themselves. Despite the apparently good intentions that inspire those who seek to be “in touch” with the people they study, scholarship as repetition strikes me as chauvinistic inasmuch as it presumes that what the speakers have already said for themselves requires our authorization.

Because I tend to think that my responsibility is first and foremost to that circle of wagons called the discourse of academia, I advocate a far more humble project for scholarship on human behaviors. As phrased by Jack Lightstone—a scholar of Greco-Roman Judaism who, as far back as 1984 made it evident that he had carefully read his Jonathan Z. Smith—one of the basic rules that such an epistemologically modest study follows is that

the scholar’s own (analytic) taxa must be other than those of the data. To wholly adopt the subjects’ classifications, unable to move beyond them in acts of interpretation, is to become a member of the group, bound by its framework.
(1984: 5)

Although scholars study all sorts of human behaviors, that we do not speak the same language as the people we study, that we do not swap stories with just anyone, is precisely the point that ought to attract our attention, prompting us to be curious about why some scholars encourage us to enter conversations about personal commitments with our students rather than initiating these same students into what Tomoko Masuzawa terms “rigorous historical discourse analysis” (2000: 164). In trying to minimize difference and conflict by presuming our identification with just some of the self-reports we study, we miss an ideal opportunity to make a significant contribution to just such a rigorous study, one that will tell us much about how uncertain and contestable social boundaries are managed. And so it is with this more modest goal in mind that I conclude by citing the last of Bruce Lincoln’s “Theses on Method”:

When one permits those whom one studies to define the terms in which they will

be understood, suspends one's interest in the temporal and contingent, or fails to distinguish between "truths," "truth-claims," and "regimes of truth," one has ceased to function as historian or scholar. In that moment, a variety of roles are available.... None, however, should be confused with scholarship. (1996: 227)²

Notes

1. Segal's comment was made as part of a presentation he gave at the 1995 Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, held in Mexico City, Mexico.
2. Portions of this paper will soon appear as a review essay in Studies in Religion; a revised version of this essay is the basis for chapter two of Religion and the Domestication of Dissent, or How to Live in a Less than Perfect Nation (London: Equinox Publishers, 2005).

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