Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

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"Truth" or DARE: Let's Replace "Transparency" with "Explicitness"

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"Truth" or DARE: Let's Replace "Transparency" with "Explicitness"

Posted: **Wed Apr 27, 2016 8:36 pm**
by **CraigParsons**
“Truth” or DARE? Let’s Replace “Transparency” with “Explicitness”

The thought I’d like to add to this rich exchange may seem small and pedantic: I’d like to see most or all usages of the word “transparency” in this process replaced by “explicitness.” DART should be replaced by DARE. Trivial though it may seem, I think this change could help. “Explicitness” captures better what we’re talking about. A shift to it might help focus the discussion in desirable ways and could narrow the distance between certain positions.

Let me first note my very rough position on the whole initiative. I like explicitness, and think that it is in fact definitional of “scholarship.” Smart people from many walks of life often make the same arguments that scholars do, but what makes the arguments “scholarly” is that the scholar tries to render explicit how he or she got there. Thus DART is not exactly a new idea in spirit, as many people have remarked. We are already asked constantly and pervasively to be explicit. Still, explicitness is demanding and difficult; like everybody else I have cut corners on it at points. For that reason I’m ready to agree that it is good for qualitative research to be asked even more constantly and pervasively to be explicit—especially if this reinforced call for explicitness is accompanied by some more room in or around journal articles to lay out explicitness. If I can be given some more text space or an appendix to do something that I was already effectively being asked to do, that is a net gain.

But is DART in its current form (JETS and a few journals’ operationalization of this pledge) really just asking qualitative scholars to do things that they were already effectively being asked to do in a scholarly arena of explicitness? Many critics say no—that it advances somewhat carelessly beyond that broad goal in ways that may advantage certain kinds of scholarship and disadvantage others—and I’m sympathetic to many of their concerns. My point of departure here, though, is that <u>if</u> DART could take a form that reinforced and clarified our already-existing demands for explicitness, and recognized that we may need more journal space to do so, then I’d be comfortable with it. I suspect this outcome is possible.

To have any chance to get to that version of this initiative, though, I think we would need to refocus its goal by replacing “transparency” with “explicitness.” Here are two reasons why this shift could help.

1. The main one: “transparency” carries a simplistic connotation of “truth.”

a. To the extent that something is transparent, we can look right through it and see that it is clear. The strongest objections to DART depart from post-positivistic epistemological positions that suggest that such a goal is chimerical in scholarly work. Scholarship passes through too many complex judgments to ever be simply transparent, and even the most technical of those judgments carry meanings and implications that reflect certain values and agendas. Anyone selling “transparency” is thus actually selling something else.

b. “Explicitness” does not have the same connotation. Indeed, it might even lend itself to the opposite kind of connotation in ways that could be well received by the most post-positivistic scholars. An argument that is explicit does not claim to achieve a limpid neutrality; it claims to have made efforts to lay out its choices, revealing its judgments and values and agenda as much as it can. While scholars who seek transparency seem to be declaring a search for claims beyond subjectivity, scholars who seek explicitness seem to be recognizing their subjectivity and declaring the intent to bare it to others as much as possible in the interest of dialogue.

c. The gains that this relabeling holds for making more post-positivist scholars comfortable with the initiative’s goals don’t seem to me to have any costs for more positivistic scholars. The more positivist the position we take, the more explicitness and transparency converge to mean the same thing. “Date Access and Research Explicitness” is a little clunkier as a label, but DART isn’t exactly about elegance.

2. Transparency is not obviously a goal with diminishing returns, but explicitness is.

a. At least in any common-language use of the word, it seems like more transparency would always be good: the more visible, accessible, and lucid our scholarly processes, the better. Of course we can raise arguments that pursuing this good creates trade-offs in a variety of ways—much of the DART discussion is about such trade-offs—but arguments about trade-offs still do not challenge the notion that more transparency itself is always positive.

b. Explicitness, on the other hand, clearly has diminishing returns that eventually turn negative in their own right, irrespective of other trade-offs. At certain points additional explicitness clarifies the commitments and logic and practices of the scholar; in later increments it actually lessens the clarity of the work by burying it in unnecessary process, autistic details, and pointless pedantry.

c. It seems to me clear that the practices being discussed under DART do have diminishing returns that will be negative if pursued too far—at some point actually obfuscating clarity of scholarship and argument in nitpicking process—and thus that an intuitive sense of the plausible benefits from this initiative fits an “explicitness” vocabulary better than one about transparency.

d. I don’t mean to oversell this benefit: it won’t be easy for us to agree where the returns to explicitness turn negative. The same debates over trade-offs with transparency will continue in a shifted vocabulary. But it will be a little clearer.

Shifting to a vocabulary of explicitness won’t be revolutionary—it won’t resolve most of the debates we’re having—but it might at least couch the discussion in terms that a wider range of scholars could accept.

Re: "Truth" or DARE: Let's Replace "Transparency" with "Explicitness"

Posted: **Sat Apr 30, 2016 4:23 pm**
by **malahtun**
DARE! Love it.
im not optimistic about changing an acronym already associated with sunk costs, but your reasoning is sound.\
mala

Re: "Truth" or DARE: Let's Replace "Transparency" with "Explicitness"

Posted: **Fri May 06, 2016 2:28 pm**
by **kathycramer**
I like the idea of replacing transparency with explicitness, too.

Re: "Truth" or DARE: Let's Replace "Transparency" with "Explicitness"

Posted: **Fri May 13, 2016 12:41 pm**
by **arsenalderek**
Very nice suggestions!

What we of course want to avoid is unfortunately a relatively common practice in case studies of people claiming that empirical material is evidence of their claims without providing arguments for why the material can act as evidence, what it means in the context, and why we can trust the found/not found evidence.

This requires being explicit about the reasoning linking each step of the process whereby we translate empirical material to evidence-based claims. Here evidence law and how historians work with empirical material can provide relevant ideas about procedures that might work in case study research for being explicit about each stage of the process. In a court we cannot as a prosecutor just show up with a piece of metal and claim it is a smoking gun; instead there are clear rules for how this empirical material is 'translated' into evidence that can substantiate guilt (or innocence). It is in this direction we should be going regarding being explicit - not towards adopting similar procedures than those that are relevant in laboratory research settings.

Re: "Truth" or DARE: Let's Replace "Transparency" with "Explicitness"

Posted: **Sat May 14, 2016 3:28 pm**
by **Mary Hawkesworth**
Thanks, Craig, for making explicit some of the concerns that postpositivists have about the notion of transparency. In thinking about the burden imposed on researchers by DARE, do you believe that a call for explicitness will enable scholars to probe the tacit presuppositions that structure our horizons of meaning and shape our interpretive work? Is explicitness grounded in a correspondence theory of truth? Can it resolve the complex issues that Richard Bernstein raises in Beyond Objectivism and Relativism (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983)?

Re: "Truth" or DARE: Let's Replace "Transparency" with "Explicitness"

Posted: **Wed May 18, 2016 9:27 am**
by **CraigParsons**
Thanks for your reply and questions, Mary. I'll have to go delve into the Bernstein to reply more specifically--

-read it long ago---but I don't think a call for explicitness implies reliance on a correspondence theory of truth. Consider why we want explicitness. For a naive positivist with a simple correspondence theory of truth, it is because we simply want to lay out (transparently) the way to the best conclusions about the empirical world. But for a post-positivist without a correspondence theory of truth, the justification for explicitness is actually stronger. Whereas the naive positivist is just interrogating the world directly, and the challenge is simply doing so clearly in a replicable way, the post-positivist does not have an obvious world as interlocutor. Instead he/she has other people's ideas and discourse in a social space. While the contribution of the naive positivist is defined by reality, the meaning and value of the contribution from the post-positivist are defined by relationships to the other positions in the social space. We can conceive of that way of achieving meaning and value in many ways---are "contributions" interventions that are broadly recognized? subvert hegemonic understandings? etc.---but however we conceive of them, it seems to me that they all require quite a lot of explicit attention to how one position relates to what other people have said. When meaning comes from positioning vis-a-vis other ideas, explicitness seems enormously important. Thus people like Hayden White point out that narratives only make sense against other narratives; or as Derrida puts it, "…we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest." These thinkers seem to agree, at least implicitly, that parsing out explicitly how our views relate to others around us is much (or all!) of what we need to do as scholars.

If you'll forgive me for tooting my own horn, I recently published an extended argument to this effect---that all epistemologies except naive positivism lead to the view that the value of our work is dependent on explicit contrasts to alternative positions: "Before Eclecticism: Competing Alternatives in Constructivist Research," in International Theory 7:3 (November 2015), 501-538. Some of its language will probably be a bit too positivist-sounding for your taste---I am a middle-grounder, or perhaps idiosyncratic, in many ways---but my hope is that it still makes sense from a very wide range of positions.

So I think an explicitness vocabulary should be one on which a wide range of epistemologies could agree, at least more than a transparency vocabulary.

At the same time I wouldn't have any illusions that a shift to DARE or anything else we're doing here could resolve any major epistemological issues. At best it might give us all a nudge to be as explicit as we can be in a variety of ways---including, I would expect, some "explicit arguments against explicitness" from groups or journals who could agree that explicitness in a broad sense is a shared value but who end up not subscribing to specific DART/DARE practices, and who take this opportunity to voice the sharpest arguments they can offer about why they do things differently. We end up with a declaration that we're all trying to be explicit and some well-publicized explications of multiple ways to do so, which is probably the best outcome we could hope for.

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