Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

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research in non-democratic countries

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research in non-democratic countries

Posted: **Wed Apr 13, 2016 9:34 am**
by **ailitripp**
I posted a version of these comments earlier on a Da-rt dialog site. I am especially concerned about the implications of these guidelines for those of us who work in non-democratic contexts. It is hard to disagree with the overall aims of the DA-RT guidelines. It goes without saying that it is important to show how one's conclusions are backed up by strong evidence. I think that is the essence of doing rigorous research, along with being able to demonstrate the importance of the subject, how it advances knowledge, and its theoretical significance.

But I fear that guidelines that treat all types of research the same, without distinguishing specific challenges inherent within them, will further privilege those who do quantitative research and will seriously disadvantage 1) comparativists; 2) researchers who work in non-democratic contexts; and 3) researchers who do qualitative fieldwork. They will serve as a disincentive to junior scholars to pursue qualitative research projects, especially in those parts of the world we understand the least, precisely because they are difficult to work in. While it is important to do quantitative analyses, they are insufficient to being able to understand complex processes and dynamics in a country or countries.

I have been recently working in southern Morocco (also known as Western Sahara), which is an extremely politically sensitive place to be working. But it is also one of the most fascinating places I have ever conducted research. Looking at the guidelines, I am now wondering if my research can ever be published in a major political science journal.

There seem to be protections for people who work in authoritarian contexts in the guidelines, but when editors actually see the kinds of restrictions the Human Subjects committees place on us, I wonder how much flexibility there will be in practice. I worry not so much about the guidelines and more about how aware those implementing them will be of the ethical considerations in and challenges of doing research in non-democratic contexts.

Even interviews that are not particularly sensitive can be barred from being revealed publicly and must be destroyed after a certain amount of time to meet IRB requirements, especially if one is working in a non-democratic context. The people who serve on the IRB committees also don't always fully understand the research context and place restrictions based on their own limited knowledge of a country. The DA-RT guidelines refer to such situations as being an exception, but as IRB restrictions and requirements expand, I

wonder how exceptional these cases are going to be. I worry that in actually implementing these guidelines, many of us are going to find ourselves caught between a rock and a hard place.

But even if there are no onerous IRB restrictions, do people who are interviewed really want their interviews made public? Will they have a say in any of this? If they know the interviews are going to be made public, how will this affect interviewees' willingness to be fully open and honest even if the interviews aren't associated with a name or affiliation? Often the content of the interview will reveal who the person is to those who know the context especially for those of us who do elite interviews. Won't that erode trust and confidentiality in the interviewer? I study women and politics and women's movements in Africa and I can't imagine people would want some of the things they say publicly attributed to them or their organization or even to the women's movement and its opponents. They don't want their strategies, jealousies, frustrations or weaknesses revealed to their competitors, opponents, or people they are lobbying. The same is true for those who oppose the women's organizations. If you have ever been interviewed by someone else you will know exactly what I mean, even if you have nothing in particular to hide.

I have interviewed people in contexts of war, where people do nasty things to each other. In the course of interviewing, people have confided in me about other politicians who tried to kill them or succeeded in killing their loved ones, admissions of stealing, of being raped, of having affairs with key leaders, of sabotaging industrial production to increase prices, and so on. Most of these specific comments should never be made public in any form, in part, because they are potentially libelous. But one might want to write generally about a certain related phenomenon based on such comments. How would one provide evidence without providing actual texts of interviews that people who made the statements never dreamed would be made public?

I have no idea how the replication part would work for qualitative research. It is already hard enough to conduct research in many parts of the world. I am working in North Africa at present and just to carry out research in what is a politically challenging environment to say the least, I had to learn not one but three languages (all of which are used on a daily basis), obtain funding, find a research affiliation, get research clearance and dozens of other complicated permissions, apply for writeup funding, line up research assistants, negotiate my personal life and a leave from my department, take care of complicated logistics in a country where all the systems are unfamiliar and sometimes unpredictable, go through an onerous IRB process, and establish a wide network of contacts. Anyone who wants to replicate this to check that my interviewees said what they said, you are more than welcome to do so.

I am concerned that the benefits of these new requirements do not outweigh the transaction costs of meeting them in challenging research environments and in some key parts of the discipline. They run the risk of creating serious ethical dilemmas and force researchers to violate IRB requirements if they comply. It would be good if APSA and the journals would give more consideration to how the DA-RT initiative will affect the whole field and find other ways to ensure greater rigor without making research and publication impossible for important sections of the field.

Aili Mari Tripp
Department of Political Science and Gender & Women's Studies
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Re: research in non-democratic countries

Posted: **Sun Apr 24, 2016 2:26 pm**
by **JFox**
Thanks for sharing these excellent points.

Re: research in non-democratic countries

Posted: **Tue Apr 26, 2016 4:01 am**
by **cboone**
Thank you Aili for an excellent statement of the issues involved.

I second all that she has said.

Re: research in non-democratic countries

Posted: **Wed Apr 27, 2016 3:05 pm**
by **essimmons**
Thank you for sharing your comments. You raise critical questions and I agree with your concerns.

Re: research in non-democratic countries

Posted: **Mon May 09, 2016 7:45 am**
by **Guest**
I agree with Aili's comments, particularly her insight about DA-RT demands potentially working at cross-purposes with IRB demands. The question around what information people will withhold if they know everything will be made available to journal editors, reviewers, or the public, is very important. However, it also seems likely that interviewees and other research participants won't fully understand professional requirements on research access and transparency, which raises another set of ethical issues that complicate informed consent.

Re: research in non-democratic countries

Posted: **Thu May 12, 2016 7:11 pm**
by **TimButhe**
Thank you, Aili, for starting a very important thread and writing such an informative post with reference to a specific context and with concrete examples. And thank you to the anonymous poster who noted an additional concern, as well as to those who have weighed in to confirm that you share Aili's concerns. **It is very valuable to have a sense that the concerns and tradeoffs Aili articulated are widely shared by other researchers working in research contexts of non-democratic regimes**.

I also greatly appreciate the point Aili raised about the need to think about costs, benefits, and tradeoffs differentially, e.g. for different research context, different analytical approaches, and different ontological and epistemological stances--and to articulate best practices, if there is a sense of such best practices among those who actually engage in (or are seeking to engage in) particular kinds of QMMR research. This is precisely what motivated the proposal for these deliberations at the QMMR business meeting at APSA 2015 (and the symposium that Alan Jacobs and I edited for QMMR).

For preparing the shift from the first to the second stage of the deliberations (which are in stage 2 supposed to take place in differentiated working groups), it would be extremely helpful to have all of you--and others--weigh in again to let us know: **Is research in non-democratic countries/regimes sufficiently distinctive to warrant a separate working group? Or should it be combined** with deliberations concerning other specific research contexts (keeping in mind that all of ultimately only have a limited bandwidth and that we therefore should avoid having a larger number of working groups than really necessary)? If you'd like to see

this research context (as the defining feature of one differentiated working group) combined with others: **Which other context do you consider sufficiently similar?**

And *if you'd like to already weigh in on what I trust we'll discuss at greater length during stage 2*: Aili made the important point that she is in principle strongly supportive of "**show[ing] how one's conclusions are backed up by strong evidence**." It would be really great to hear from as many political scientists as possible with research experience in non-democratic contexts: **How might this objective be achieved without violating IRB rules or broader ethical commitments and obligations? What do you do yourself? What have you seen others do that you think works well in these (or other differentially identifiable research context)?**

Re: research in non-democratic countries

Posted: **Wed May 18, 2016 12:00 pm**
by **jwharbeson**
I agree with all that Aili has written. I would only add that the points she makes extend to working in countries well beyond those that are certifiably non-democratic, not just the unique setting in which her current research has taken place. Her comments apply in situations to partially democratic countries and even in darker, murkier contexts of supposedly fully democratic countries.

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