Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

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Socially Responsible Political Science?

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Socially Responsible Political Science?

Posted: **Tue May 17, 2016 4:23 pm**
by **Guest**
Since returning from my dissertation fieldwork in a conflict zone, I've been thinking about a few ethics-related questions: First, how should we treat the privilege of research subjects relative to one another, when some fall victim to broad social injustice and others do not, particularly in conflict zones, where lack of access to voice can have life or death implications? Second, does the academic sanitation of human suffering into the trappings of research titillate and disenfranchise those who experience those events, and if so, how does that affect both our discipline and those people we study? Lastly, could, and should, we construct a socially responsible political science – one that has a mandate as a group, rather than individuals, to conduct research for the betterment of the world? Can we center our discipline on improving human condition and reducing social injustice without losing the value of science itself?

Many of these touch on themes already discussed on this forum - eg Sarah Parkinson's recent post. But while I approach these questions from the prospective of a conflict scholar, I think these issues apply more broadly. Of course, there are many, many scholars who handle the below issues with grace and a great deal of care giving to each of individual and to social injustice more broadly. And, these conversations may well be ongoing in circles to which I am not privy.

Privilege of research subjects relative to one another along lines of social injustice:

We have an idea of the questions scholars must contend with while in the field, and how our own privilege shapes our relationship with our research subjects (Fuji 2010, 2012; Carpenter 2012, and many more). But in many cases we examine as political scientists, whether qualitatively or quantitatively, one of the interview or survey cohorts has more rights or access to voice than the other in a given social context. How should we think about disparity in privilege of people within a conflict zone, or within society more generally? What is our obligation when we are confronted with disparities in access to opportunities for voice? Should we privilege certain stories over others, especially in a context like occupation, or where a group has a legacy of unequal treatment within that state due to their race or skin color?

#BlackLivesMatter vrs. #AllLivesMatter provides a good example. We know that white voices are louder than black voices in our society, so to treat these cohorts of voices as equal is to continue to prop up existing systems of inequality because of the nature of inequality and the historical legacy of injustice that permeates those social processes.

I think academia generally tells us to treat those two cohorts of voices as equal, while mentioning "the direction of bias" that might introduce into our data. This takes the human element out of what is happening - certain groups of people simple have more access to voice than others. We try to talk about those cohorts as the same with idea that privileging one group of voices would bias our results in some material way. Can we work to redress that inequality in access to voice without losing the "science" in our research? I think treating cohorts the same affects the results we find more than treating them differently would. When we treat stories from different cohorts with different access to voice as the same, we reify within-conflict disparities.

"Sexy" Research and Socially Responsible Political Science

Conflict, violence and human suffering are described in our discipline as "sexy" research topics. Like people slowing to watch a car crash on the freeway, something about human suffering makes people pay more attention, but in a way that doesn't necessarily meet the needs or support the people who experienced those events. There is no way to take suffering and making it sexy unless you have glazed over the true horror of those actual human experiences; unless you have been able, at some level, to forget what each of those numbers or words actually means. While there are exceptions, people who truly attempt to take the stories and use them as respondents intended those stories to be used, who give compassion and voice to research subjects, and who try to use their academic credentials to redress social injustice, it seems far more common for us as a group to lose something of the human eliminate of what we study. There is often so much lost in turning suffering into data, whether the research is qualitative or quantitative. We use the cover of saying that work on these issues "brings attention" and the chance for change, but in the vast majority of cases, we benefit personally far more than those we study.

What does the sterilization of violence research do to researchers and our subjects? I think the way we treat suffering reflects our fetish with the objective and sterile, where connecting deeply with the communities we study is considered a flaw in our research design. This type of sanitation has lead to egregious ethical abuses in the fields of sociology and anthropology, prompting these fields to reevaluate their approaches to qualitative research. Indeed, anthropologists have moved far away from the methods political science uses in the field. Epidemiology and public health are able to keep the to the value of research, to conduct academic research that holds up well under scrutiny, but that is also clearly biased. These fields have a clear mandate and do not treat the chance of saving lives or not saving them as equal. As political scientists, the underlying tenant of the field (not of individual researchers) seems to be much closer to the idea that producing knowledge is valuable for knowledge's sake than it is to remedying global injustice. We don't have a field-wide mandate to conduct research that improves the state of the world, despite being deeply mired in issues of social injustice, global inequality, interpersonal violence or large-scale horror. But research can be pointed at a specific goal, be designed to remedy or address social inequality, and be scientific at the same time. Is that something that is even possible for us to strive for, and if so, how would we do it? History is littered with examples of people who have tried to "do the right thing" only to make matters worse; but at the same time, to not make social responsibility a goal, to not consider the ways in which we as a discipline could work to improve the world, seems a greater sin.

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