Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

hosted by the Social Science Research Institute at Duke University on behalf of the APSA Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research
https://www.qualtd.net/

Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

https://www.qualtd.net/viewtopic.php?f=27&t=165

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Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Mon Oct 24, 2016 2:00 pm**
by **cherianmampilly**
2) In what ways does research in settings of political violence present particular risks, costs, or limitations for transparency practices? Are there specific issues related to transparency that arise from the study of political violence that render it distinct from other areas of inquiry?

Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Thu Nov 24, 2016 10:41 am**
by **steeleaa**

> *cherianmampilly wrote:*2) In what ways does research in settings of political violence present particular risks, costs, or limitations for transparency practices? Are there specific issues related to transparency that arise from the study of political violence that render it distinct from other areas of inquiry?

I think the risk of identifying informants is an obvious and serious one in settings of political violence, but I don't think that there is no parallel risk in other settings, such as under authoritarian regimes. In either setting, the priority has to be on protecting informants' safety over transparency to the broader public.

Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Wed Nov 30, 2016 6:50 pm**
by **jdriscoll**

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Abby and I both hang out with a lot of well-funded people in the discipline (who I consider colleagues and friends, and I'd be willing to bet she does, too) that are extremely comfortable talking about “bad guys.” They know what they mean, and they know what they are doing, when they use this language. It is prescriptive. The bad guys need to go away, and hopefully that happens with as few collateral civilian casualties as possible. But do not mistake the fact that it is prescriptive. That's why they're funded. "Policy impact." "Evidence of impact." They actually took this advice seriously in graduate school and, as a result, they are now quite secure in their lives.

But if we are not those people, why does it mater? It matters because it means that a lot of “us” are, whether we choose to admit it to ourselves or not, at least potentially, in the “preventative kinetic action” business. So are our graduate students. That ship has sailed. Thick description of life in places like Mogadishu or the North Caucasus, if complete with proper nouns, can be an intelligence asset. More subtly, the social intelligence can be deployed to provide warrants for the “they *are* bad guys” claim, allowing other people to connect the dots themselves. I don’t think any of this is new; I think “critical languages” are critical for a reason. The criticism of things like the Human Terrain Program are familiar to most readers of this board, I am sure. But the bottom line, for me, is that many young scholars hedge their bets. They are aspirational political science guild members, but they are keeping the idea of working (or consulting) for three-letter agencies in their back pocket. It is hardly original to notice that lot of area studies expert knowledge can be re-purposed in the interest of the national security state. This is point that is, perhaps, a little bit more salient now that we live in an era of predator-drone targeting, but it is not a new point. Local knowledge can, absolutely, be seek-and-destroy. The British Empire invented area studies; comparative politics has grown out of that root-stock. There is a literature in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism that is explicitly prescriptive; there is also an edgy way of doing descriptive work that is implicitly prescriptive, and that definitely sells books.

That means that when you run around a war zone, or recently-settled conflict zone, and hand out university business cards, and promise people you’re grad student, they don’t stop looking at you funny. In one of my interviews in Tajikistan, a respondent nailed it: “Of course you’re a graduate student today. That just means when you go in, you’ll go in as a G-13.” The interview didn't stop then, however. Like many other interviewees, who were themselves anonymous ("thanks, IRB!"), he had no problem at all naming *other people’s names* and even drawing sprawling maps of networks. I would bet almost anything that some of my best key informants spoke to me with the candor that they did because of, not in spite of, the fact that they had a working theory that I was there in the first place to identify “bad guys” and that I might pass a list of names of “bad guys” on to…someone. This biased my data in some ways, and I try to talk about them openly in my book because I am positive that I am not the only researcher in my generation for whom this is true. But in the end, I had to destroy a lot of my notes. Transparency took a back-seat to liability.

Plenty of future graduate students and scholars are going to try to do this kind of work anyway. Roger Petersen (2001) makes it really crystal-clear that understanding what the +2’s are up to that is the key to understanding certain kinds of violent social activism; I honestly think that going and interviewing these

people, if it can be done safely, is a kind of work that is really worth doing. To the extent that there is a risk that the DA-RT regime would be implemented in a way that makes this infeasible or very costly, it's to the detriment of the discipline, I think. Most people can agree that transparency in the method of collection is a reasonable expectation. Most people can also agree that researchers working in war zones, or "hard authoritarian" environments ought to be pre-delegated, by the guild and by our home institutions, to make the judgement calls that keep people safe, or to keep faith with promises made to people who do not enjoy our social protections. (Not everyone has a blue passport). In my experience, the representatives of the IRB, as easy as it is to caricature them, are actually pretty sympathetic to the idea that total transparency is, when it comes to war zones, neither feasible nor desirable. This gives me some hope that as we move forward as a community, we will not focus on straw-men or edge-cases. I have written this email to focus on something that is more structural: I think the assumption that our entire community is (potentially tagged as) implicated in U.S. military activities may taint our data collection efforts. The strategies to combat this source of data bias are going to vary a lot person to person, but it is easy to imagine ways in which a heavy-handed interpretation of the DA-RT regime deters the next generation of scholars from trying to improvise in this space. (Though the rewards of trying to operate in this space are small, and the War on Terror has no end in sight, so all of these psychological claims may be premature).

Mark Beissinger's quickly written post on the epistemology/fraud thread is absolutely spot-on. If we "quallies" are being asked to provide documentation that is orders of magnitude more than what our quant colleagues regularly do not provide, we shouldn't even bother crying foul -- we should just take our toys and move to a different part of the playground. It might be that all of this comes from an earnest attempt at replicable science -- and, to the extent that this is true, of course we ought to share replication files (I do). But it might also be, more than some admit, about raising the barriers to entry for certain kinds of work, like the kind that Abby and I (and probably anyone who has found their way to this venue) value. To the extent that it's the latter, it's a real problem.

Jesse Driscoll
UCSD

Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Thu Dec 01, 2016 6:14 pm**
by **amt**

> *cherianmampilly wrote:*2) In what ways does research in settings of political violence present particular risks, costs, or limitations for transparency practices? Are there specific issues related to transparency that arise from the study of political violence that render it distinct from other areas of inquiry?

I agree with Abbey: protecting human subjects should take precedent over transparency. I wanted to add that often this does not only require keeping names and attributes of informants confidential but even the names of neighborhoods and villages, as the details we have to give in order to present our evidence can be enough for a local to identify the identity of key players and/or informants. This does not mean that we cannot improve transparency in qualitative research that aims to make causal claims, but rather that our criteria have to be flexible. Authors should be able to explain why they cannot reveal certain attributes of their informants and/or research sites.

Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Fri Dec 02, 2016 8:09 pm**
by **Guest**
[quote="cherianmampilly"]2) In what ways does research in settings of political violence present particular risks, costs, or limitations for transparency practices? Are there specific issues related to transparency that arise from the study of political violence that render it distinct from other areas of inquiry?[/quote]

I can't post online under my name given the difficulties of studying political violence in the Middle East, where even knowledge that you visited one country may mean that you are not allowed into another. If you add that you studied political violence in said country and interacted with those who committed it, then the chances of you being able to ever conduct research or even enter certain countries again is placed in extreme doubt. Political violence is unique in that it is often considered illegal and treasonous by governments, communities, or both, and those who commit it or support it are subject to scrutiny, harassment, imprisonment, or death. Researching it therefore adds significant risks for researchers and subjects beyond what scholars face in most other areas. On the one hand, I work incredibly hard to be transparent with my interviewees about the work I'm doing, how I will report their words and observations, and how I will maintain varying degrees of anonymity for them. On the other hand, I believe strongly in the need for transparency and replicability in social science. I therefore do as much as I can, but I cannot (and would not) do the work I do if I had to always produce the names or full transcripts of my interviews for public consumption. This would put my interviewees and myself at significant risk (not to mention that IRBs would not approve it and individuals often would not talk to me). One need only look at the oral history project of militants from the Irish Troubles from over a decade ago to see the problems and pitfalls of transparency in this area. I therefore hope that any standards for transparency take account of and adjust for the unique challenges of studying political violence (especially in the Middle East) and the absolute necessity of protecting subjects and researchers to ensure ethical and safe practices and outcomes.

Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Mon Dec 05, 2016 8:25 am**
by **cherianmampilly**
Thanks Jesse. The question of researcher positionality is one that I struggle with constantly. As you point out, an American passport can never be a neutral thing in the context of researching violent groups considering the role of the US in taking sides in conflicts around the world. This is compounded by the race, ethnicity, religion and gender of the researcher. Speaking personally, too much of our conflict research assumes that "objectivity" is the perspective of a white male researcher with a US passport who knows who the good guys are. As someone who checks some but not all of those boxes, I am constantly struck by the degree to which a single perspective is presumed to be universal (and objective) and the work of those operating from outside, especially those with ties to the research subjects, is assumed to be biased. What would it look like if political scientists were expected to reflect on their own positionality as a form of transparency when conducting research? (Anthropologists are expected to do this, but political scientists generally seem unconcerned).

Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Mon Dec 05, 2016 8:31 am**
by **cherianmampilly**
Thanks Abbey and Ana. Protecting informants seems like the most pressing concern for those of us who

study political violence in relation to transparency and is clearly an issue that we have to raise in relation to DA-RT. I wonder if you both (or others) might reflect on a related issue-- the ways in which our research can affect the outcomes of political conflicts? Should we as a community have a normative commitment to peace? Or must we adhere to a notion of impartial objectivity that seeks to not affect the outcome of the conflict at all? Is the latter even a possibility?

Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Mon Dec 05, 2016 8:33 am**
by **cherianmampilly**
Thanks Anonymous for sharing your experience. Such posts are certainly welcome and helpful in helping the broader community understand the particular challenges of conducting research on political violence. I hope others will consider sharing their own experiences, anonymously or not.

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Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Mon Dec 26, 2016 2:43 pm**

by **akuperman**
At least two people I interviewed – one in Rwanda, and one in Kosovo – were subsequently killed in apparent political violence.

Although I do not believe that my interviews, or publications based on those interviews, contributed to their demise, these deaths underscore the potential vulnerability of interviewees in research on political violence, and our responsibility not to gratuitously publicize information that could endanger them simply to satisfy questionable demands by certain methodologists.

My interview research has been mainly with elites in recent or ongoing internal conflicts – i.e., the political and military elites of rebel/revolutionary/liberation movements and of the states they oppose. These are senior officials who should understand the potential risks and benefits of giving interviews, so this aspect of my research method is akin to journalism, and I leave it to the interviewee to choose on or off the record. That being said, it is possible that publishing a statement made on the record by an interviewee could provoke retaliation against the interviewee. I accept that responsibility because I believe it is justified by my research endeavor – whose ultimate goal is to facilitate reduction of violence against non-combatants. But I believe that publishing the remainder of interview transcripts or notes would gratuitously endanger interviewees since there is no comparable research justification. I am unwilling to accept that responsibility.

Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Mon Jan 02, 2017 2:59 pm**
by **joseph.brown**
I agree with this (and the above by everyone generally). I would also like to speak to some additional concerns about the impact of "transparency" on elite interview subjects, non-interviewed individuals identified in transcripts, and the researchers themselves. Sorry that this is long...

The Northern Ireland/Boston College fiasco (noted above, and well-described here: http://www.chronicle.com/interactives/belfast) shows the unforseen dangers that arise for many parties when transcripts are released in full. The release of transcripts (even to an archive) undermines any promise of anonymity or confidentiality that we make to any individual. As Boston College researchers discovered, a country with extradition treaties can request the US government to subpoena interview materials and render them to the government of the foreign state. In the Boston College example, it was the publication of extensive interview transcripts (Ed Moloney's "Voices from the Grave") which led to UK/US subpoenas of Boston College.

The subpoena of interview materials (full transcripts and audio tapes) led to the arrest of at least two ex-conflict participants, neither of whom had any involvement in the interviews -- or any opportunity to offer "consent" to the release of materials implicating them in murders. Northern Ireland residents will generally attest to the destabilizing impact of the Boston College fiasco on the peace process, since one of the arrestees (Gerry Adams) is himself a major figure in the peace deal of 1998. (Zachariah's question related to our effect on conflict outcomes seems very relevant in the NI setting.)

The failures of research ethics in the Boston College case are partly the researchers' -- for over-promising confidentiality while placing the full interview materials in a third-party archive. In another sense, the failures are those of a "liberal" government that is gradually rolling back first amendment protections. The Supreme Court ruled that we, as academic researchers, have no immunity to resist subpoena of interview materials -- even if the requests are being made at the request of foreign governments, for their own purposes.

Making transcripts available exposes those we interview AND any other individuals identified in our

interviews (even elites). I believe that these non-interviewed individuals should also be part of our ethics concerns.

Lastly, I think that we need to give some thought to our own vulnerability (in the research location and in our "home" locations, considering the web of extradition/cooperation treaties that currently exist). The information in interview transcripts may provide legal grounds to subpoena research materials that we are NOT required to submit for replication.

In the Boston College case, UK/US authorities subpoenaed interview tapes not quoted in the book that sparked the controversy. UK police realized that a trove of interviews existed, with contents unknown, at a US location that could be subpoenaed. All Boston College-held materials became fair game. Consider the potential vulnerability of your own materials: computers, hard drives, recording equipment, smart phones, and passwords used for Dropbox and email accounts used to contact interview subjects.

One can imagine a case where researchers interviewing "terrorists" (by any government's definition) are subject to seizure of personal materials and passwords because their computers were used at some point in the interview process and there may contain additional information relevant to "terrorism" investigations. This is a serious concern for me, having interviewed "terrorists" in Ireland, Sri Lanka, Spain, Peru, and the United States. The more information I have to submit under DA-RT, the more vulnerable I get, and the more vulnerable my subjects, on several continents, get, if any one of the countries involved thinks there might be actionable information in my possession, physical, cloud-based, or email-based. You can try to delete any relevant materials as quickly as possible as you go along, but some trace always remains, even if it's just the records of who you've been emailing.

I would really prefer not to get dragged into anything like the Boston College case, which started out as an apparently innocuous transcript release, like DA-RT. It's dangerous in ways you may not realize until something goes wrong.

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Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Tue Jan 03, 2017 3:48 pm**
by **scottstraus**

I would like to second these excellent posts. In my experience, researchers who study violence are often intensely aware of the risks that they, their research assistants, and their interviewees assume when conducting research on sensitive topics like violence. We know in these circumstances that some actors are willing to harm others in order to protect themselves, get what they want, and punish others. Often in consultation with IRB boards, we take measures to minimize the risks in the research and to preserve access for ourselves and future researchers. We are close to the situations at hand and make judgments as professional researchers. I am concerned that the proposed transparency rules will remove the context sensitivity that many of us develop in favor of blanket rules. That in turn might create new, unforeseen risks that could jeopardize people's safety, trigger legal action, or curtail future research access, as the Boston College/IRA example shows. If those outcomes were even a remote possibility, I would avoid publishing in a venue that would require that I release transcripts or otherwise provide raw data that could have negative, unforeseen outcomes. I suspect others would do the same, which ultimately will limit the kind of work that could even be considered in certain journals. That seems like a very unfortunate outcome for the discipline.

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Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Thu Jan 05, 2017 10:08 am**
by **Lise Howard**
I agree completely with the general thrust of this thread. As Alan said: "I believe that publishing the remainder of interview transcripts or notes would gratuitously endanger interviewees since there is no comparable research justification."

I have been conducting research about peacekeeping since the mid-1990s. I generally interview international elites who are not really in danger of politically-violent retaliation. However, my interviews sometimes take place in dangerous places, and I have often relied on UN peacekeepers for my own protection in getting to/from interview locations.

I have gone back to some of the same elite subjects multiple times over decades. Part of my interview protocol is that, if I want to use the subject's exact words in a publication, I promise to email them their words in context so that they can re-approve/edit as they choose. If they thought that I might make all of our conversations public--even anonymously--they would probably no longer talk to me. The breach of trust would be broken. The quest for transparency, even if not lives, would kill the research.

Re: Question 2: On the specificity of political violence research

Posted: **Thu Jan 05, 2017 10:06 pm**
by **emoncada**
This an extremely important conversation. I would only add that the points raised in this thread are not particular to the study of political violence but also resonate in the study of criminal violence -- a growing area of research within the field. Of particular concern in my own research is how the growing emphasis on micro-level research in the literature on criminal violence (again aligning with the micro-level turn in civil war research) can generate and compound many of the challenges being discussed here. For example, in my recent work on protection rackets and violence I've shifted my focus to specific groups of businesses concentrated in extremely small spaces (e.g., a single city block or a single informal market in the middle of a neighborhood). In doing so, however, I've struggled with how to conduct systematic observation and interviews while being easily recognized by both the victims and criminal coordinators of protection rackets that often co-exist in these spaces. Here I face the challenge of both maintaining the anonymity of my interview subjects from other interview subjects while also not endangering their safety. At the same time, the micro-level focus generates challenges in terms of the degree to which I can anonymize the interview subjects and sites in my written and published work (e.g., how can I assure interview subjects that nothing in my written work will endanger them when their particular locale is the only one of its kind in a particular city and the nature of their locale is analytically relevant to my argument)? As part of this thread or perhaps in a separate thread, it would be important to consider the overlap and differences in the types of challenges that researchers face along these lines in work on both criminal and political violence.

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