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
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Is there a tension between the principle of research openness and the willingness to pursue tough questions?

https://www.qualtd.net/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=169

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Is there a tension between the principle of research openness and the willingness to pursue tough questions?

Posted: **Wed Nov 02, 2016 1:09 pm**
by **ElliotPosner**
On Nov. 1 2016, GUEST wrote (as part of the first thread of I.2 Research Ethics): "I am concerned that we are going to collectively sacrifice interesting questions and deep knowledge in order to valorize "openness." It is not at all clear to me that transparency is more important than answering questions that matter for politically sensitive locations and issues."

I thought this concern might merit a separate discussion thread. Is there tension between the principle of being open about the use of human participants, on the one hand, and the willingness of researchers to ask challenging questions, on the other? Are these competing pursuits? What are the ethical considerations?

Re: Is there a tension between the principle of research openness and the willingness to pursue tough questions?

Posted: **Sun Nov 27, 2016 8:44 pm**
by **mneesha**
I do think there is a tension between research design complexity and "openness" about research participants. Having just published my first book, (which would have been undermined at every step of the ethnographic process had I been having to operate under a DART framework due to the sensitive nature of both conversation content and trust-based access), I am now designing my next major project.

To risk being too candid, as a tenure-track but as-of-yet untenured professor, I have found myself considering how the complexity of the project in relation to the DART considerations is making me calculate what kind of project is worth the risk. If I engage collaborate methodology that includes input from indigenous community leaders who would not sign off on the kind of online posting of transcripts being discussed, does that mean I should scrap that element of the study, even though I think it is vital? Is this the time in my career to design something more parsimonious, that more easily lends itself to evaluation under DART standards, even though I ardently disagree with the larger framework of assumptions behind the standards?

I use this personal example to illustrate the pervasive way that these QTD conversations, and already-implemented DART standards, are making their way into the analytical reasoning that myself, and possibly other early career scholars, are thinking about the question posed on this thread. Is there a tension between the engagement of human participants in research and the willingness to ask challenging questions, given the context of the DART agenda? For me, yes. My hope is that this forum will point us towards how to ease this tension.

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Re: Is there a tension between the principle of research openness and the willingness to pursue tough questions?

Posted: **Mon Nov 28, 2016 10:35 pm**
by **cjmartin@bu.edu**

> *ElliotPosner wrote:*On Nov. 1 2016, GUEST wrote (as part of the first thread of I.2 Research Ethics): "I am concerned that we are going to collectively sacrifice interesting questions and deep knowledge in order to valorize "openness." It is not at all clear to me that transparency is more important than answering questions that matter for politically sensitive locations and issues."
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I agree that there is a tension between asking the tough questions and complete transparency. I have largely interviewed business managers in firms, lobbyists and government politicians and bureaucrats. Business managers who speak on the record are usually very circumspect. Others may demand in advance that they not be identified and they are often willing to speak frankly once this condition is accepted. Lobbyists are quite interested in being mentioned by name, but they are often likely to overstate their importance in policy processes. Thus both too little information and exaggerated claims may be challenging. Cathie Martin

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Re: Is there a tension between the principle of research openness and the willingness to

pursue tough questions?

Posted: **Wed Nov 30, 2016 5:02 pm**
by **etsingou**
Interviewing practitioners in the financial sector would be extremely dull if all interviews were on the record and there have only been a few occasions when on the record discussions produced new material in my experience: when an interviewee is on advocacy mode (which brings another set of issues) and when, at the height of the financial crisis, many in the sector were on reflection/mea culpa mode.

In that respect, full transparency (as in accessible transcripts) would undermine the efficacy of the method and compromising on confidentiality would be counter-productive. There are, however, other ways to be 'open', such as documenting the process without revealing confidential information. This can also make interview material more visible in articles.

Re: Is there a tension between the principle of research openness and the willingness to pursue tough questions?

Posted: **Thu Dec 01, 2016 9:47 am**
by **cschnei**
As a former member of our institution's IRB and as a long time ethnographer, who works in at risk communities, I am extremely concerned with the demand that our field notes be sent to journals. This concern is amplified under a Trump administration where undocumented immigrants, Muslims, members of Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ, and perhaps even dissidents may face real danger. Having conducted ethnography in communist shantytowns during Pinochet's dictatorship I was constantly aware of how anything my sources told me could put their own lives and the lives of others in danger. On the IRB I used my personal experience working in a dictatorship to help researchers consider all the possible ways in which confidential information might fall in the wrong hands. During the field research for my dissertation I developed an elaborate coding scheme so that my notes (ofter written on napkins as I did not carry either a notebook or tape recorder) were then assembled and used in my writing. I cannot imagine how sending such data -- written by hand in coded Spanish on napkins and scaps of paper would be deciphered by a journal. I could just transcribe the notes I use in the article and send those but since those notes are my "data" such interviews would already be in the article. To force researchers to hand over notes that might endanger their sources, even when those interviews are not used, is a serious ethical concern. It also makes a lie of consent forms that promise that the information is confidential. Again, Trump's election makes this a more grave concern. What if someone is doing research on dissidents in Russia? Should all those field notes be sent to a journal? This entire DA-RT initiative seems to be completely oblivious to the dangers of working in non-democratic regimes. And recently we have seen the justice department subpoena evidence gathered on the IRA in Boston College. Do journals want to possess information that a Trump administration can subpoena?

Re: Is there a tension between the principle of research openness and the willingness to pursue tough questions?

Posted: **Fri Dec 02, 2016 1:51 pm**
by **separkinson**
It's intriguing to me that much of this conversation has equated "full transparency" with the depositing of field notes or interview materials (I speak of the entire debate around DA-RT, with aspects of it reflected here).

As someone who employs ethnographic and interpretive methods, "transparency" in those realms isn't linked to sharing these materials (which would often break confidentiality agreements with interlocutors and thus be unethical). Rather, it's about "giving a recipe" that lets the reader evaluate how one generated evidentiary material (as the material itself is not "raw data" but rather a record of intersubjective experiences). So, "full transparency" in this realm is about the conditions of possibility for the research, so to speak: Did the researcher speak the local language? Where did they live? For how long? To what types of people did they speak? How have those people been protected from harm, both during and after those interactions? How did their position in the field affect their interactions with interlocutors? Were the interlocutors told of various sources of funding?

If transparency=sharing field notes and interview materials, which for some people it does, then it clearly limits our ability as researchers to ask interesting, challenging questions. I'm much more interested in a transparency that concerns itself with the dignity, respect, and protection afforded to those with whom we conduct research, which affects our ability to ask those questions in the field and to gain interesting, nuanced, valid evidence.

Re: Is there a tension between the principle of research openness and the willingness to pursue tough questions?

Posted: **Fri Dec 02, 2016 10:52 pm**
by **timothy.pachirat**
I'm in full agreement with Sarah Parkinson when she writes: "It's intriguing to me that much of this conversation has equated "full transparency" with the depositing of field notes or interview materials (I speak of the entire debate around DA-RT, with aspects of it reflected here)." In another post on this site, I try to unpack why it is that DA-RT narrowly frames transparency in this way and what some of the consequences are for those of us who think about, and try to enact, transparency and ethics in our work in ways that are radically different from DA-RT's narrow focus on the depositing of fieldnotes and interview materials. I also explore why DA-RT's deposit-based focus leads to a curious reduction of "ethics" to a concern about "dishonesty" to the exclusion of other, far more important questions:

viewtopic.php?f=13&t=157&p=751#p751

Timothy Pachirat

Re: Is there a tension between the principle of research openness and the willingness to pursue tough questions?

Posted: **Tue Dec 13, 2016 10:12 am**
by **ElliotPosner**
Like Eleni, I interview financial sector practitioners and authorities with inside information about how market rules are made. Without frank conversations with these people, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to answer the kinds of questions I've been addressing in my research. I couldn't agree more with Eleni's initial comment: "Interviewing practitioners in the financial sector would be extremely dull if all interviews were on the record..." And she's right that trying to make the interviews more transparent could easily be counterproductive.

Her suggestion that there are other ways to be open, "such as documenting the process without revealing confidential information," resonates with themes elsewhere in this thread (Timothy Pachirat and Sarah

Parkinson) and in other threads (for instance, Lee Ann Fujii https://www.qualtd.net/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=116).

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