Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

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publishing fieldnotes

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publishing fieldnotes

Posted: **Sat Nov 12, 2016 5:07 am**
by **ailitripp**
Some people have suggested that we make our fieldnotes public. I work in authoritarian contexts. I cannot imagine making my fieldnotes public. Apart from the obvious danger they might put my interviewees in since I work in authoritarian contexts, how could these notebooks possibly help anyone else? They are written to myself. They include interviews with people I did not want to tape because I felt the person would not talk freely if I taped the interview or because they refused to be taped. They include discussions with my assistant and lunch/dinner conversations friends and acquaintances I did not interview but found their observations interesting nevertheless. If it was not a formal interview but an informal discussion I did not ask them whether they wanted to be taped or interviewed, so the IRB protections do not cover them. They include observations of demonstrations, some illegal in places where journalists are thrown out of the country over covering such demonstrations.

They include reflections on the news. They include jokes, rumors, hearsay, graffiti, which may or may not be true. They cannot be used as hard evidence of anything, but might be used to reflect on a popular sentiment. They include comments people make that are racist or sexist or offensive in some way. All this requires context and interpretation and cannot be presented in a standalone fashion. Sense needs to be made of these notes. Alone they mean little to the reader and can easily be misinterpreted.

Making fieldnotes public assumes that knowledge and understanding is something is acquired in discrete pieces rather than something that evolves over time and builds on previous knowledge. What I once thought early on was important I no longer think as questions get answered through the interviews and my understanding improves. They reflect my own ignorance of a situation more than anything else, but it changes as my research experience continues. Publishing early musings in a project is useless.

What do people imagine are in such fieldwork notes? I think there is an image that they are coherent, orderly observations about one's daily experiences. There is some of this. But my notes also include a lot of ephemera. They include messy abbreviated lists of what I know, still need to know and still need to ask about. They include outlines for papers and my book and these outlines also evolve. My notebooks include interview questions for specific people; book and author references; spellings of people's names who I should interview, phone numbers of people to contact, to do lists, shopping lists, words that have been translated and spelled out in a foreign language, definitions of words, explanations of the meaning of foreign terms and concepts that cannot easily be translated into English, etc. How would these benefit anyone else but myself?

Re: publishing fieldnotes

Posted: **Sat Nov 19, 2016 10:27 am**
by **lafujii**
Could we please all acknowledge that publishing fieldnotes does NOT make any research(er) more transparent? It is such specious logic that I can't even imagine anyone thinking this is a good move, regardless of the research context. And of course, authoritarian settings just makes this a completely unethical task and therefore untenable *for any reason whatsoever.*

I hope that one thing that comes out of this QTD process is a GIANT pushback on the overly narrow DA-RT understanding of what constitutes "data" and "evidence" and what it means to make persuasive knowledge claims.

I'm not an expert on taking field notes (I'm an even worse practitioner) but I do know that there are many different ways of keeping a field diary and many different uses for them later. To require of any ethnographer or cub ethnographer that their fieldnotes might be subject to public posting is to hollow out what it means to do ethnographic work, to write fieldnotes, and to protect human participants.

Re: publishing fieldnotes

Posted: **Sun Nov 20, 2016 12:41 am**
by **amfulmer**
I very much agree. I would add that it's very difficult to imagine someone earnestly reading through my field notes with good intentions. They are verbose, they are confusing, they are full of shorthand, and they are scribbled out in my notoriously bad handwriting. I just can't imagine a situation in which anyone would honestly comb through them in the name of social science. I can, however, imagine a scenario in which someone went through them in search of names, numbers, or dirt on an enemy.

Re: publishing fieldnotes

Posted: **Wed Nov 23, 2016 12:37 pm**
by **Guest**
I agree with the fact that sharing fieldnotes would give possible journal editors or whoever would be reading them the raw data without necessarily providing much useful information about the data interpretation process that connects the raw data to the theoretical outcome. It would be sort of like giving them ingredients for a unique meal without knowing how someone made the actual meal. From their perspective, having the raw ingredients may be better than nothing. Sharing fieldnotes would be helpful from an empirical perspective, yet it would not be enough to understand inductive theory-building.

What kind of data would be ethically shareable? From a common sensical perspective, information included in the empirical section of an article that needs to be verified : the specific interview notes from which quotes originate, the interview notes from which interviewees are cited without being quoted, and the hand-written sources from which observations were arrived at. If qualitative data are quantified, the relevant interview notes from which data were quantified would need to be sent to the editor as well as coded information. Interview data should not provide information that would reveal interviewees identity, especially for research projects for which maintaining interviewees' anonymity is central.

My sense is that new transparency rules might be inconvenient for projects that were already conducted and which have not yet been completed. Yet investigators can adjust to new transparency rules in how they design their future research projects so as to minimize the possible ethical risks involved in sharing data they collect in the field: by avoiding references to names and numbers in their notes, and even perhaps making their notes more comprehensive when possible.

And while editors might only get the raw data, it is not impossible for investigators to write a note along with their fieldnotes to shed some light on the interpretive process involved in linking the empirics of an article to the theory, or vice versa.

Re: publishing fieldnotes

Posted: **Mon Nov 28, 2016 5:44 pm**
by **jpaller**
I agree with most of these responses, especially with respect to publishing fieldnotes in authoritarian contexts. This is in many cases impossible, and unethical. I do not think there should be any imposed standards from the outside.

But I do think there are cases where ethnographic fieldnotes can serve as an empirical dataset and can be shared publicly, just like any other form of data--quantitative or qualitative. All data is interpreted by the researcher, so ethnographic "observable data" still needs to be interpreted. And fieldnotes can be "cleaned," just as quantitative researchers do with their raw data. I see the value of publishing ethnographic fieldnotes when scholars are using daily observations to make a causal claim. They can serve as an empirical dataset that documents the politics of daily life in the following case:

When the researcher is trying to use ethnographic observations as data to uncover political activity and behavior in the context of the everyday. For these claims to be made, this method involves the researcher follow a norm of consistency based on three principles: a systematic research design, non-arbitrary data gathering techniques, and sustained and consecutive visits to the field site.

First, selecting the context of the everyday can subscribe to comparative case study selection methodology as many political ethnographies do. Second, the data gathering techniques should be consistent and non-arbitrary. This means that the researcher should use the same interlocutors, use a steady method of writing ethnographic field notes, and document the same type of empirical observations across field sites. The empirical observations documented in field notes can then serve as an empirical dataset. While these notes themselves might not be replicable, they can be used to confirm conclusions or draw alternative generalizations. Third, this form of ethnographic research requires sustained, uninterrupted, and consecutive research in the field. The context of the everyday requires researchers to not only immerse themselves in their field site, but to do so for a sustained period of time on a daily basis. There is a tendency for scholars of political science to claim that any casual or informal interactions they have during their fieldwork are ethnographic (they often are not). The form of ethnography I am outlining here requires a researcher to go to the same site of daily politics over a sustained and consecutive time period.

This is a certain type of ethographic research that relies on systematic observations of daily political behavior. In this case, the behavior still needs to be interpreted by the researcher, but this interpretation can be done outside the scope of the fieldnotes. The value of documenting the behavior in fieldnotes is that it helps outline the process of politics, the networks that underlie formal political institutions, and the spontaneity of daily life that might shift political decision-making. Other researchers can then confirm the pattern of daily behavior, or draw alternative conclusions.

In sum, there is a space for making fieldnotes public, especially when ethnographic observations are used as "observable data of the politics of daily life." But this should be up to the researcher and not imposed by external actors who do not know the context and ethics of knowledge production.

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