Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

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[From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

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[From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Thu May 12, 2016 3:52 pm**
by **easchatz**
What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Following on Deborah Yashar’s invitation to think about transparency in different research traditions, I want to reach out specifically to those who conduct ethnographic research.

I strongly sense (based on several posts and many more conversations) that political ethnographers uniformly and roundly reject the approach to “transparency” represented by DART/JETS. The approach would hurt rather than improving knowledge, would too easily violate ethical commitments, and would seriously complicate efforts to publish ethnographic work, making original data production less and less likely. (Touching on these issues are posts by Wedeen, Grahame, Wood, Stroschein, among others.)

But where should ethnographers go next? I wonder if we might specify clearly and positively (i.e., without particular reference to DART/JETS) what “transparency” would look like for ethnographers. Related, are there any aspects to DART/JETS that are worth retaining for ethnographic work?

Craig Parsons offers a stimulating proposal to qualitative research scholars of all stripes: that we replace the principle of “transparency” with “explicitness.” Would that work for ethnographers? Is the following statement defensible: “Transparency in the ethnographic tradition means explicitness”?

Alternatively, what are other meanings to transparency that ethnographers might prefer to embrace? Or, if the principle is fundamentally inapplicable to our research tradition, what alternative criteria for evaluating research should we highlight instead of transparency?

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Fri May 13, 2016 1:55 pm**
by **alyssagrahame**

This post takes up the question of what transparency would mean in the ethnographic research tradition beyond answering to DART. What is transparency in the first place? For whom, how, and to what end do we incorporate transparency into ethnographic research practices and production?

One of my students this past semester for her final research project compared political corruption in two countries. A starting point for her research was Transparency International's (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). Since TI has been on my mind in the context of her project as well as my own, I will take it as a starting point for thinking about the meaning and role of transparency in political ethnographic research.

At first, TI is less clear about what transparency *is* as it is about what transparency is *not*. Most simply, transparency is not corruption. The organization sets out to give "voice to the victims and witnesses of corruption. We work…to stop the abuse of power, bribery and secret deals."

So, TI is primarily concerned with corruption, defined as "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain." A little more digging reveals how the organization conceptualizes transparency, which "means shedding light on shady deals, weak enforcement of rules and other illicit practices that undermine good governments, ethical businesses and society at large." However, transparency's practical value in fact lies in its instrumentality, that is, facilitating accountability--a requisite of "public trust."

Similarly, the Sunlight Foundation aims to promote "accountability and transparency." It "[believes] that information is power, or, to put it more finely, disproportionate access to information is power. We are committed to improving access to government information by making it available online, indeed redefining 'public' information as meaning 'online.'"

The OED offers a plethora of definitions of transparent. Here are just a few:

1a. Having the property of transmitting light, so as to render bodies lying beyond completely visible.
2a. Frank, open, candid, ingenuous.
2b. Easily seen through, recognized, understood, or detected; manifest, evident, obvious, clear.

Between TI, the Sunlight Foundation, and the various OED definitions (especially the figurative ones), we might start to see transparency as an ethic – a guide for action. Seen this way, transparency also invites consideration of the obligations it entails – for whom, how, and to what end is this ethic put into practice?

Practitioners of (interpretive) political ethnography tend to eschew the notion that (social) scientific inquiry is value-free. We strive to be aware of and explicit about our positionality and the political motives that guide our research questions and relationships. My own work is guided by an ethic of transparency most closely aligned to being frank, open, and candid.

As researchers who work with living populations, but whom are nonetheless researchers, ethnographers incur ethical obligations to multiple communities. These include the communities where we conduct research, researcher communities, and the audiences of our work. To complicate matters, these can and do overlap, increasingly so. Yet they might also diverge and conflict with one another. In contrast, in twentieth century ethnographies, there is a baseline assumption that the communities are discreet. I suspect, for example, that Clifford Geertz did not imagine his research participants as the intended audience of "The Balinese Cockfight."

The first answer to the "transparency for whom" question, in my case, means the people who kindly gave their time and trust to participate in my research project. My goal was to be candid (transparent) about the motivations behind my research questions, including my own political commitments. My approach also meant being open about what I would do with the accounts and experiences participants shared with me.

They have a say in how I use the data they provide, especially if their name is attached to it.

The second answer fits well with Craig Parsons' invitation to "explicitness." But there are a couple of problems with this concept on its own. First, as it stands, explicitness is only directed at fulfilling obligations toward the researcher community. The second problem is the question of how to assess whether an argument is sufficiently explicit (I'll get back to this).

The third answer is unsettled. I expect my audience to encompass the communities contributing to the study and the scholars who read, engage with, and evaluate my work. I honestly don't know yet whether the first two obligations will conflict with each other—but the communities do overlap substantially.

In terms of "how," TI is again instructive, pointing out in its index that corruption is by nature difficult to measure. So it relies on surveys of "expert opinion." The CPI therefore consists of just that – perceptions. I doubt there is a good way to measure candidness or explicitness. I approached my potential participants – including those whose political commitments might differ from my own – with a genuine desire to understand their perspectives. Only my research participants can determine whether I am open and candid enough to merit their time and trust. Not coincidentally, whether an ethnographer has supplied a convincing scholarly account has much to do with the audience's assessment of whether the argument is sufficiently explicit.

The question of "to what end" is even more difficult. To come back around to where I started, I see transparency as not only a scientific ethic, but also a political one.

It's perhaps unsurprising that in the post-financial crisis era, transparency is widely seen as a point of consensus and a force for democracy. But in 2010, just two years after a financial crisis blamed in part on endemic political corruption, the denizens of Reykjavík voted to send this assumption up, electing a protest/joke political party to municipal government that promised, inter alia, to be "openly corrupt."

The recent Panama Papers rendered corrupt practices transparent – laying bare the now-former Icelandic PM Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson's connection to offshore accounts (worth noting: he's still an MP). In Russia, people seem to have merely shrugged at the similar implication of Vladimir Putin. In both cases, I doubt that the Panama Papers revelations came as much of a surprise – **they "rendered completely visible" what was already "manifest" or "obvious."** Even in the Icelandic case, which at least holds out the possibility of accountability, support for the Independence Party, the political party most implicated in the production of the financial crisis has actually increased.

In some research traditions, the "end" of transparency might be validity, conceived of as replicability. This might dissuade research "corruption" and promote accountability. For ethnographers, there is likely no single research goal of transparency. Some (political) ethnographic research sets out to shed light on the otherwise hidden, obscure, or unremarkable. Other projects might aim to resolve an apparent puzzle or paradox that was observable from a distance but could only be understood from up close. Still others might do both. Each of these approaches might entail a different role for transparency, with different answers to the "for whom" and "how" questions. It probably goes without saying that in ethnographic research, the answers to these questions will be very particular to each project.

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might "transparency" look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Fri May 13, 2016 2:36 pm**

by **mneesha**
I think that some degree of explicitness can be useful, but as Alyssa Grahame mentioned in this thread, there are concerns if the "endpoint"of explicitness is replicability. I favor transparency that is not operating in that axis. Rather, what if transparency looked more like Aisha Ahmed's April 7th post calling for positionality as an element of research presentation? As a white, female, US-based political ethnographer, I do think that understanding who I am (power/privilege/demographics) is useful for understanding how my research design might have played out in interviews in ethnic minority communities in the Global South that operate on male dominant premises.

So transparency could include not just the "peek under the hood" of the qualitative process, (ie the questions asked in interviews and the keys used to code responses that are often found in the appendices), but also a statement about how the researcher's self relates to the space of the interviewees or communities in which one is participating and observing. This information could be valued more up front in our publications, as an integral part of the conversation, rather than tucked away at the end where many readers bypass it.

This is one small suggestion and I look forward to reading more posts on this topic. If explicitness for political ethnographers still leads us towards the drive to replicability, I don't think that kind of explicitness would pass ethical muster in many of our commitments to particular communities.

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Sat May 14, 2016 3:11 pm**
by **essimmons**
For many of the scholars with whom I have discussed questions of transparency in the past few months it does, indeed, seem to mean some kind of commitment to replicability. For ethnographers this simply makes little sense, for precisely the reasons outlined above. Positionality matters enormously in the work we do. I agree that we should be reflexive in our own work when that makes sense, and that this is a critical piece of our scholarship. But I also want to be sure that we aren't talking past each other when we try to engage with scholars for whom transparency has come to mean replicability. How do we make sure that we are all doing our best to explain why transparency-as-replicability isn't possible for ethnographers but that the knowledge we create is no less valuable simply because someone else can't go out there and do what we did to try to tell the same story?

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Sat May 14, 2016 3:14 pm**
by **Mary Hawkesworth**
Tiim Pachirat's "The Tyranny of Light" in the spring 2015 symposium in Qualitative & Multi-Method Research 13(1):27-31 does a terrific job in explicating critical differences between positivists' constructions of transparency, grounded in concerns about replicability, and the norms of reflexivity and trust central to ethnographic work. When considering research on historically marginalized populations, it might also be important to consider how crucial creativity is to knowledge production. I am thinking, in particular, of what we learn when we compare Fanon's chapter, "The Fact of Blackness," (Black Skin, White Masks) with normalized presuppositions in colonial discourses on race or standard social science analyses of ethnicity; or the theoretical transformation in the study of kinship that occurred when Gayle Rubin analyzed Levi-Strauss's work in her essay "The Traffic in Women." In marked contrast to replication, creativity and innovation and

the epistemic particularity of a scholar can be crucial to getting the world right.

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Sun May 15, 2016 10:34 am**
by **Guest**
Sorry, how do you know that you are "getting the world right"? What is the basis for others putting credence into your claim of having done so?

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Tue May 17, 2016 3:24 pm**
by **jdriscoll**
For the little it is worth, I really like Ed's “Transparency in the ethnographic tradition means explicitness” idea.

One ongoing question that I have about implementation in practice (which I raised in the comments of Aisha Ahmed's April 7 post) is how to square explicitness, and invocations of positionality*, with the valuable norm of double-blind peer review. Obviously this isn't a problem with books (which, since we don't deal with the same kind of word limits, is where most good ethnographic data is ultimately going to be published)...but this whole conversation is about what ought to be valued by top journals.

Jesse Driscoll
University of California San Diego

* Every time I type positionality it comes through with a dotted underline suggesting a misspelling. This is an (annoying!) reminder that it is a new word. People might not agree on its meaning or usefulness.

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Sat May 21, 2016 10:36 am**
by **lafujii**
I think what makes so many ethnographers and interpretivists like myself so uneasy about the term "transparency" as deployed by DA-RT is (1) the promotion of a single meaning rather than the recognition of the term's contested or multiple meanings depending on the researcher, her positionality, methods, and methodological commitments in a particular study; and (2) the enforcement of this single meaning through specified procedures (posting datasets, using active citations), procedures that remove or sideline other bases for good research and analysis, such as MORE REFLEXIVITY.

While I applaud Ed raising the larger question of what "transparency" might mean for ethnographers, I fear the question itself plays it into the idea that focusing collective attention on this issue (over all the other possible issues of equal or greater importance) is a legitimate starting place for discussion. I do not think it is--at least for the research that I do and for all other researchers for whom DA-RT styled "transparency" literally makes no sense (I point readers to Timothy Pachirat's superb QMMR essay, "The Tyranny of Light").

Even if DA-RT/JETS were to squeeze in a disclaimer or alternative definition of transparency, one that was more befitting of non-positivist work, I would STILL BE AGAINST IT because by enforcing one standard and enshrining a single value DA-RT helps to delegitimize those research traditions that have their own standards and values.

Ken Jowitt used to say that all institutions are partial. In other words, all institutions--including or especially those that claim to be impartial--privilege some groups/individuals over others. To pretend that DA-RT is not a political project that seeks to enforce a single vision of what "good research" is is, I fear, to give up too much ground from the start. I applaud the discussions on this site and the wonderfully thoughtful posts that my colleagues have crafted. But what happened to the question (raised by Jeff Isaac months ago): Should we be discussing DA-RT at all? Should we not be discussing everything that we have been discussing (ok, thank you, DA-RT, for that one unintended good) because issues such as positionality, research ethics, protecting participants, etc. are worth talking about on their own?

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Sat May 21, 2016 4:34 pm**
by **Guest**
Hi,

Above, I asked the question "how do you know that you are "getting the world right"? What is the basis for others putting credence into your claim of having done so?" in response to the proposal by Hawkesworth.

In response to the proposal by Fujii, I have a similar question. This post claims that proposals on QTD and elsewhere to find common ground and to produce broader and shared access to various types of knowledge can "sideline other bases for good research and analysis, such as MORE REFLEXIVITY."

Here is my question. Without the type of discussion we are having, how does one determine the bases in the quote. What is good research and analysis? What is the proper amount of reflexivity? Can any scholar claim anything they want? If so, from what if any basis does shared knowledge arise? Even the post which criticizes DA-RT for advocating for a single standard (which is not how I read it) assumes its own standard.

My feeling is that we should be more up front about all of this, and I am grateful to the organizers for providing us with this forum.

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Mon Jun 06, 2016 2:23 pm**
by **Renee Cramer**
Hello, all - I have been silent on this board, waiting to let my thoughts about DA-RT settle, after having participated on a roundtable at the WPSA, and having just this weekend been at Law and Society, where we had a terrific conversation about these issues, with an interdiscplinary and mixed methods group. I intend my comments here to not replicate (yes, a small joke) what has already been said - but to amplify what I've read here, and on the thread about interview research, above.

A bit of context for my work: I am an interpretive scholar trained as a political scientist, and publishing mostly sociolegal work. My current project, funded by the National Science Foundation, examines the regulatory landscape for midwives in the United States, some of whom are operating in states where their practice is criminal - it also examines their legal, political, and cultural mobilization to seek legal status/decriminalization. I work with participant-observation, ethnographic, and interview data - as well as archival, and content analysis of news stories, trial transcripts, and legislative testimony. My IRB agrees with me that there are substantial risks to many of my subjects, and that making even some (but not all) interview data publicly available would jeopardize (by process of elimination) those who's transcripts are not public; my institution's IRB also agrees that things like field notes (even redacted) are inappropriate in the public domain; and those that I interview and interact with have made clear that they do not want their interview transcripts made public - they place trust in the *relationships we have formed, and my scholarly credentials and previous work* not in the hands or minds of other researchers whom they do not know.

The NSF agrees with my IRB - and I agree with the NSF that publicly funded work should be publicly available: so I am working (at a teaching institution, with no graduate students) to be as transparent with my data as possible: I am achieving that through partnerships with midwifery organizations that can be more public in collecting statistical data about birth, outcome, and perceptions of legality; I am also achieving that by putting all of the trial transcript, press, and public archival material that I use in my analysis, on line at the close of my project.

So - I want, instead of focusing on what should be available, to focus on the questions that I will take in good faith, from above "how do you know that you are getting the world right? What is the basis for others putting credence into your claim of having done so?"

I appreciate the questions – because they remind me that we all work, even within the same discipline, from such disparate traditions. And, I want to give a more thorough answer in the coming day or two – with some citations to work in my field(s) that provides a better answer than I attempt to give, here:

How do we know we are getting the world right? Well: we might not. That is why I do interpretive work. I accept that what we/you can know about the "rightness" of my work relies on your own evaluation of the interpretation I make of the world I observe and interact with. This isn't as simple (and I do not mean simple in a derogatory way, the most beautiful things can be simple) - it is not as simple as checking my math in an equation, checking my code book for errors, or thinking about the variables I use and the value I assign them. Knowing if I am "right" becomes less important than the superordinate question: "Is my interpretation persuasive?" Or, "Is my interpretation plausible?" Or, "Is this interpretation one that can shed light on related phenomena?"

We interpretive, ethnographic, and interview-based researchers do have standards for articulating answers to these questions (this is where I hope to provide some citations in the day or two to come). And, I know these questions come up routinely in peer review of our work. There are entire journals dedicated to thinking through how to evaluate an article or book's qualities of reflexivity, validity, interpretation, method, self-reflexivity, articulation of positionality, reciprocity, and ethics. We have vibrant conversations about them ... and we argue over whether some work achieves them, or not. Those conversations are at the heart of our scholarly endeavor as a community – just as they are for those who practice other methodologies, or speak to other traditions.

... I have to run and do an orientation for new students - but hope to be able to participate more, and more fully, in this forum/these conversations. I am grateful to the conveners of this virtual space for encouraging thoughtful dialogue.

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Wed Jun 08, 2016 7:23 pm**
by **Guest**
I am a student trying to keep track of the arguments in this very important thread.

Hawkesworth claims to be interested "getting the world right" and guest asks about the basis for others putting credence into that kind of claim.

Fujii claims that proposals on QTD and elsewhere to find common ground can "sideline other bases for good research and analysis, such as MORE REFLEXIVITY" and guest asks for a clarification about what constitutes good research and analysis from this perspective.

Cramer appears to dispute Hawkesworth's claim about whether it is possible to make a claim of rightness. Cramer offers persuasiveness as the real criterion which could be a means of sidelining as Fujii puts it. Another contradiction.

At this point, I'm really confused about how these arguments clarify the role of transparency in ethnographic research. I hope that we can make more progress on this important issue.

Re: [From Steering Committee] What might “transparency” look like for ethnographers?

Posted: **Wed Dec 28, 2016 5:25 pm**
by **Bill Kelleher**

> *Guest wrote:* Hawkesworth claims to be interested in "getting the world right" and guest asks about the basis for others putting credence into that kind of claim. ... and guest asks for a clarification about what constitutes good research and analysis from this perspective.
> Cramer appears to dispute Hawkesworth's claim about whether it is possible to make a claim of rightness. Cramer offers persuasiveness as the real criterion which could be a means of sidelining as Fujii puts it. Another contradiction.

I don't see any conflict between Hawkesworth and Cramer. There might be a conflict if one reads "getting the world right" in some kind of total, final, objective, unchanging, and absolute sense. Then the implied relativity of persuasion would seem to be in conflict.

But for the researcher, the term "right" can mean that one has accurately stated what one "sees." And for other political scientists, it can mean that one has been persuaded, and agrees with a given interpretation. (As when I exclaim, you got that right!)

In my view, the only test for the validity of an interpretation is the intersubjective agreement of the relative community of experts. Each renders her or his own professional judgment about the "rightness" of a knowledge claim. That establishes the Truth status of a claim. That status can be based on unanimity, agreement with reservations, or doubtfulness -- all in varying degrees. The cumulative knowledge in a field will be based on varying degrees of acceptance.

An interpretation may be agreed to in whole, or in part, or rejected in whole. Reasons for one's judgment can be given, and common standards of judgment can be developed. That is what happens in the development of the Common Law. Standards are formulated on a case-by-case basis. There is a body of key standards, and new standards are developed for novel cases.

The credibility of the researcher making claims is always one component of the judgment by each expert. Some of that judgment is based on the past acts of the researcher, some just on hunch.

Persuasiveness means getting past the scrutiny of the relevant experts, not necessarily fooling or manipulating them. In the ideal, each expert will render his or her opinion based on being well informed and true to his or her own professional standards. But in reality, some expert opinion as to the rightness of a knowledge claim can come from the politics of peer pressure and career concerns.

Thomas Kuhn and Michael Polanyi are key sources for my understanding of this situation.

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