Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

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Challenges and Risks of Research Openess

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Challenges and Risks of Research Openess

Posted: **Sun Nov 20, 2016 8:00 pm**
by **JaniceBockmeyer**
Any weakening in confidentiality, including the release and sharing of interview notes and recordings, field notes and other raw data that results from qualitative research, will discourage vulnerable populations from participating in research. In the mid-1980s I was privileged to hear from almost 100 single mothers in three U.S. cities about their experiences as welfare recipients enrolled in job training and education programs. If they had not received assurances that our interviews would always remain anonymous and confidential, I would not have heard their honest assessments of the programs I was then studying.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s I interviewed, and guaranteed the confidentiality of interviews with, young German protesters who were housing squatters in Berlin during a tumultuous period of aggressive and sometimes violent police evictions. Other residents in those districts were Turkish and other immigrants. If I had needed to inform them that post-study our interviews would be available to others and I would no longer be able to guarantee confidentiality, those interviews would not have taken place.

Over several decades, on various projects, I have conducted hundreds of confidential and anonymous interviews with vulnerable community residents, noncitizen immigrants and community nonprofits organizations in lower income, minority and immigrant neighborhoods in the U.S. and Germany. I am confident that without guarantees that I would never share our interview notes or in any way expose their identities, these interviews would not have happened. Immigrants are concerned about their legal status, visa and citizenship processes; some immigrant citizens fear for their families, friends, neighbors and employers. They are never at ease granting interviews. Each interview was a miracle and I am unendingly grateful for their trust.

Community nonprofit organizations are concerned about whether funders will be able to identify them after an interview; they worry about their professional networks, relationships with the neighborhood residents they serve, with public officials and other nonprofits.
It is essential to ongoing research on vulnerable populations and actors in politically sensitive environments that we continue to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of our interviews by not releasing notes, interviews – written and recorded – or other evidence of who our contacts are. Requirements that we share such data will severely hamper research that employs qualitative methods.

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