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/

Privileging Quantitative Methods and Challenging Field Work conditions

https://www.qualtd.net/viewtopic.php?f=26&t=174

Page **1** of **1**

Privileging Quantitative Methods and Challenging Field Work conditions

Posted: **Mon Nov 07, 2016 1:54 pm**
by **Diane Singerman**
Scholars who conduct comparative research in repressive societies already face many challenges. In what ways will the requirements and/or influence of DA-RT intentionally or intentionally privilege quantitative research in scholarly research, external funding criteria, and graduate training?

Re: Privileging Quantitative Methods and Challenging Field Work conditions

Posted: **Sat Nov 12, 2016 5:39 am**
by **ailitripp**

> *Diane Singerman wrote:*Scholars who conduct comparative research in repressive societies already face many challenges. In what ways will the requirements and/or influence of DA-RT intentionally or intentionally privilege quantitative research in scholarly research, external funding criteria, and graduate training?

The adoption of the DA-RT guidelines has made research even harder for political scientists working in non-democratic and war torn settings. As it is, there are many countries where few foreign scholars conduct extensive fieldresearch, in part, because of the authoritarian nature of the regime (e.g., Angola, Chad, Eritrea, Sudan) or because of ongoing conflict (e.g., Somalia, parts of northern Nigeria). For local researchers, the challenges may be even greater for political reasons. The DA-RT guidelines create new disincentives for comparative qualitative work in such contexts, and will scare junior scholars from embarking on precisely the type of research that is needed most to understand the countries we know the least about.

And while it is important to do quantitative research, it is insufficient for understanding complex processes and dynamics on the ground. Moreover, it is absurd to imagine there is any substitute for quantitative research since the types of questions and insights are so different in nature from what is yielded by qualitative research. Both are necessary but they serve a different purpose.

I do not disagree with the overall aims of the DA-RT guidelines. It is important to show how one's conclusions are backed up by strong evidence. Someone who has studied a similar context will have the ability to assess the plausibility of the findings if the author provides adequate information about the research process, sources, and context.

What does replication mean in an authoritarian context? I recently conducted research in Morocco and Western Sahara (known to Moroccans as the southern provinces). During the time I was in Western Sahara, eight foreign journalists were expelled from the area. I was acutely aware of the political sensitivities of carrying out research in this region even though I was not studying the conflict itself. But it was also one of the most fascinating places where I have done interviews in my three decades of conducting field research throughout Africa, in part, because women hold an unusually high position in this matrilineal society. I was only able to gain access because of a serendipitous encounter with a Moroccan who had worked in these provinces for six years with UNHCR and who had exceptionally good access and excellent contacts. The notion that my exact project could be replicated in the same way as a quantitative project could be verified is absurd. There are only a handful of political scientists who have worked in Western Sahara and most have looked at the issues from a more macro-perspective or with access primarily to the Algerian camps where POLISARIO is based, not in Morocco. But looking at the DA-RT guidelines, one wonders how a qualitative study of the kind I conducted could be published. Moreover, the kinds of questions I am asking cannot be addressed through a quantitative study and the secondary literature is almost non-existent.

There seem to be protections for people who work in authoritarian contexts in the guidelines, but when editors actually see the kinds of restrictions the Human Subjects committees place on us, I wonder how much flexibility there will be in practice. I worry about how aware those implementing the guidelines will be of the ethical considerations in and challenges of doing research in non-democratic and conflicted contexts.

Even interviews that are not particularly sensitive can be barred from being revealed publicly and must be destroyed after a certain amount of time to meet IRB requirements, especially if one is working in a non-democratic context. The people who serve on the IRB committees also don't always fully understand the research context and place restrictions based on their own limited knowledge of a country. The DA-RT guidelines refer to such situations as being an exception, but as IRB restrictions and requirements expand, I wonder how exceptional these cases are going to be. I worry that in actually implementing these guidelines, many of us are going to find ourselves caught between a rock and a hard place.

But even if there are no onerous IRB restrictions, do people who are interviewed really want their interviews made public? Will they have a say in any of this? If they know the interviews are going to be made public, how will this affect interviewees' willingness to be fully open and honest even if the interviews aren't associated with a name or affiliation? Often the content of the interview will reveal who the person is to those who know the context, especially for those of us who do elite interviews. Won't that erode trust and confidentiality in the interviewer? I study women and politics and women's movements in Africa and I can't imagine people would want some of the things they say publicly attributed to them or their organization or even to the women's movement and its opponents. They don't want their strategies, jealousies, frustrations or weaknesses revealed to their competitors, opponents, or people they are lobbying. The same is true for those who oppose the women's organizations. If you have ever been interviewed by someone else you will know exactly what I mean, even if you have nothing in particular to hide.

I have interviewed people in contexts of war, where people do nasty things to each other. In the course of interviewing, people have confided in me about other politicians who tried to kill them or succeeded in killing their loved ones, admissions of stealing, of being raped, of having affairs with key leaders, of sabotaging industrial production to increase prices, and so on. Most of these specific comments should never be made public in any form, in part, because they are potentially libelous. But one might want to write generally about

a certain related phenomenon based on such comments. How would one provide evidence without providing actual texts of interviews that people who made the statements never dreamed would be made public?

I am concerned that the benefits of these new requirements do not outweigh the transaction costs of meeting them, especially in authoritarian and conflicted environments and for comparativists. They run the risk of creating serious ethical dilemmas and force researchers to violate IRB requirements if they comply. APSA and the journals need to give more consideration to how the DA-RT initiative will affect the whole field and find other ways to ensure greater rigor without making publication impossible for those of us working in challenging environments.

Re: Privileging Quantitative Methods and Challenging Field Work conditions

Posted: **Tue Nov 22, 2016 5:32 am**
by **Guest**
[quote="Diane Singerman"]Scholars who conduct comparative research in repressive societies already face many challenges. In what ways will the requirements and/or influence of DA-RT intentionally or intentionally privilege quantitative research in scholarly research, external funding criteria, and graduate training?[/quote]

The new Data Archive and Research Transparency (DA-RT) protocols makes the dilemma of ethics and responsibility extremely salient. DA-RT works in conjunction with a digitalized data repository to collect the ephemera of field research—interview transcripts and recordings, field notes, participant observations. The goal is to improve replicability of studies by making these 'raw' data available for other researcher to peruse, re-interpret, and possibly re-test. Several of leading political science journals have essentially mandated that submitted manuscripts comply with DA-RT, although exceptions may be made at the editors' discretion. DA-RT raises particular concerns among researchers on authoritarian regimes who are especially sensitive to protecting the anonymity of their sources. Simple redactions of crucial words or pages will often not be adequate to prevent a regime agent from re-tracing the steps of a researcher to identify a potential leaker or dissenter. There is an additional concern that field notes and other documents could be subpoenaed by U.S. authorities, effectively voiding any notion of confidentiality. Some researchers have described situations in which they decided not to keep notes or purposefully destroyed their records in order to avoid ever having to turn them over to authorities. DA-RT, then, could place special burden on field researchers working in authoritarian regimes and could deter individual scholars from even undertaking the type of difficult and dangerous work necessary for the study of authoritarianism. This would push knowledge of authoritarianism further to the margins of Western social science. Perversely, it gives strength to authoritarian regimes' agnotological tendencies, granting them a veto over research agendas and specific scholars that they do not consider politically acceptable.

--Ariel Ahram, Associate Professor, Virginia Tech

Re: Privileging Quantitative Methods and Challenging Field Work conditions

Posted: **Mon Dec 12, 2016 10:05 pm**
by **Guest**
From Lahra Smith, Georgetown University
I too work in authoritarian contexts in the Horn of Africa and/or on sensitive topics at times. I use qualitative and interpretive methods and have worked over the years to balance the demands of my IRB and my respondents to obtain consent and provide for subjects' protection and anonymity, while providing my reviewers and readers adequate information to assess the quality of my data and the findings. In the past I have done this in part through anonymous data tables where I have lists of categories of respondents (things

like "academic" versus "NGO or civil society worker" versus "government civil servant" and location of interview) to at least give content. I also spend substantial narrative time describing my research method and in fact ethnography and qualitative method calls this reflective engagement and this methodological approach is an answer to the "honesty" in methods question.

The bottom line is that much of the work I have done over the last decade and a half in the Horn of Africa would be completely impossible if I have to inform participants that there would be a repository of any greater level of detail about their interviews or participation. Even government workers preferred verbal consent forms to signed consent forms because of long histories of state-repression and politicization of their work. Rural or peasant participants, women, dissidents, and others, all the more! The chilling possibility of down-stream costs associated with these practices, far more appropriate to highly literate and institutionalized democracies, is to reduce the already small amount of work that is done on politics in these regions of the world. I do not think the study of politics can afford such, nor should it be encouraging such.

At the same time, they reflect a misunderstanding of the 'replicability' of qualitative and interpretive work that I will not repeat here but is well discussed in other threads, but is a view that I share in full measure.

Powered by phpBB® Forum Software © phpBB Limited
https://www.phpbb.com/