Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

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The benefits of transparency in ethnography

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Posted: **Fri Dec 30, 2016 8:16 pm**
by **BenRead**
One of the three questions setting the stage for the ethnography discussion was: "Why and under what conditions is it valuable for ethnographic scholars to make the bases of their claims transparent?" A number of the posts pertain to this but it hasn't been the topic of a specific thread here yet. Understandably and appropriately, we're focused on the problems of transparency requirements, but I think this question deserves further exploration.

Clearly, ethnographers disclose a lot of detailed information in their work, as part of the normal practices associated with this method -- about their subjects' lives, their interaction and conversation with those subjects, the process of the research, and their own positions in the research. They also do a lot of selecting and choosing -- deciding which sites to spend time in, which people to talk to once and which to talk to five or 20 times, which passages from field notes to present in long, vivid block quotations and which to filter out. Scholars' specific practices vary, as they should.

I am writing this from a hotel room (with the deadline for these deliberations looming) and don't have access to my books, so I guess I will not try to go into specific examples. I think if you were to review the notable works of ethnography by political scientists or others writing on political topics, you would find that some did particularly good jobs of explaining the choice of field site, some were particularly self-conscious in writing about their own roles, and so forth. (A few exemplary works were proposed on the "Examples of Excellence" thread, but that thread didn't get very far in detailing exactly what was exemplary about each of those examples except perhaps Pachirat's _Every Twelve Seconds_.)

Perhaps, as Working Group members Nicholas and Jillian and Erica prepare the Transparency Statement, they might wish to spell out some of the *benefits* of transparency in ethnographic work as well as some specific *aspects* of a research project about which transparency can be beneficial.

Some benefits of transparency

Kathy Cramer made two points about the value of transparency: first that it helps scholarly readers understand why her work has value despite its being of a different nature than much positivist work on public opinion, and second that "... we make evidence more valuable and useful the more context we provide. ... we

better equip our readers to understand and judge our claims the more information we provide about what leads to our interpretations."

I think that Cramer's second point is particularly fundamental. It may be an obvious point to all of us who do or appreciate this kind of work, but the power of ethnographic research comes very much from its ability to take us into subjects' worlds, and that inherently involves conveying quite a bit of information about those worlds.

Transparency is also important for enabling intelligent critique of ethnographic research. Some of the most productive lines of discussion in graduate seminars that I've led concerning ethnographic books like James Scott's _Weapons of the Weak_ have involved critique: What analytical dimensions might have been left out, what might different lenses or locations or researchers have brought out that is different from what's in the published work, etc. Transparency helps readers appreciate a work's limitations and biases.

Transparency helps everyone from students to ethnography veterans to non-ethnographers appreciate the *work* and the craft that goes into this type of inquiry. It helps us learn from researchers' experiences (successes and mistakes) in the *many* ways to "do ethnography," which vary so widely. For example, students have a hard time envisioning exactly what they would do if they were to pursue ethnographic research -- including how they would even get started. Transparency can give them a range of ideas.

Some specific things about which to be transparent

Samantha Majic pointed out that "Ethnographers should be (and usually are!) transparent about how they accessed their sites/communities, their daily research routines (how and where they spent their days), how they interacted with participants and to what end (eg via formal interviews, conversations, etc), and their field note practices." Sarah Parkinson referred to "getting at the aspects of their work that structure their inferences (e.g. relationships, power, reflexivity)."

Let me suggest a few other things, related to or in addition to the above:

The motivation for and origins of a project (usually ethnographers already explain this in some detail, but it's worth mentioning)

Decisions involved in selecting a particular field site or sites (and not others)

Decisions about how much time to spend in each site or with each interlocutor or set of interlocutors

The ways in which particular ideas, concerns, or hypotheses (whether "emic" or "etic") were explored through interactions with subjects. For instance, what kinds of language and phrasology, or examples, did subjects use -- or particularly what language did the researcher use in prompting discussions?

What was explicitly discussed and what stayed hidden or under the table (perhaps because of the researcher's presence, or other aspects of the milieu). The best work, of course, is very conscious about this.

I believe there can be a danger of reinforcing one's own tentative conclusions (and not actively exploring countertendencies or contrary hypotheses) through talking again and again to the same people or similar groups of people, or asking questions the same ways. It's also part of the power of the ethnographic approach to enable the researcher to escape those pitfalls; researchers can document how they did this.

Related to the above: How the author reached generalizations on key points (and to what extent there are

exceptions to those generalizations.) One of the strengths of ethnography is that it allows the depiction of complexity and nuance. Yet ethnography usually builds to certain overarching points or generalizations or concepts, and to that extent, it involves all the problems of analytical inference that are found in qualitative research more generally. Transparency and self-consciousness about this process is desirable, in my view.

None of the above denies what I see as the two main (and really big) problems of transparency: protection of one's subjects, and the time and labor burdens that transparency imposes. I just think it's useful to lay out as fully as possible the "benefits" side of the equation -- though I haven't done that, as I'm sure I've missed a lot and I've also not done the work of providing specific examples from published works.

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