Trust, Transparency, and Process

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Recent calls for Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT) come from a reasonable desire to hold scholars accountable for their research practices and processes (Lupia and Elman 2014). These calls, however, also come from disciplinary perspectives that seem to misunderstand interpretive and qualitative research in some fundamental ways; further, they offer solutions to problems that would be much more appropriately fixed through processes of peer review. My not-so-revolutionary position on DA-RT for scholars who undertake interviews and fieldwork—especially for scholars who do so with vulnerable populations and around sensitive questions—is that *where data cannot be transparent, explanations of the processes of data collection must be.*[1] But, because explanations of these processes are standard parts of scholarly articles and books that elaborate these projects, and because peer review often centers on questions of method and interpretation, an additional layer of expectation—such as that proposed through a requirement for active citation (Moravcsik 2010)—is not only unnecessary, it is onerous, and potentially chilling for research on vulnerable populations and sensitive questions.

My work focuses on people and groups of people who want to be seen, and not seen, by the administrative state (Cramer 2015, 2009, 2006). I am an interpretive law and society scholar trained as a political scientist, and I publish within both disciplines. 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 the legal, political, and cultural mobilization to seek legal status and decriminalization undertaken by midwives and their advocates.

This research involves participant observation, ethnographic immersion, and interviews—as well as archival work and content analysis of news stories, trial transcripts, and legislative testimony. Drake University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) agrees with me that there are substantial risks to many of my interview subjects (some of whom are practicing midwifery without benefit of license) and that making even some interview data publicly available would jeopardize those individuals. My institution's IRB also agrees that releasing field notes detailing my participant observation with midwives and their advocates would, even if redacted, have the potential to jeopardize these women. Further, those with whom I interact and interview have made clear that they do not want their interview transcripts or my notes of our interactions made public. These participants place their trust in the relationships we have formed, my scholarly credentials, and in my previous work. They do not place their trust in the hands or minds of other researchers, whom they do not know.

As the authors of the Final Report of the QTD Working Group on Ethnography and Participant Observation write, "ethnographers not only grapple with questions of openness vis-à-vis the scholarly community, but also in our research sites and with our interlocutors when we are in the field" (Schwedler et al. 2019, 2). My accountability first and foremost lies with the people who participate in my study.

I agree that I am also accountable to my discipline. And, especially because my research is publicly funded, I am accountable for being as transparent with my data as is ethical, responsible, and possible. I achieve this transparency of data through partnerships with midwifery organizations that can be more public in collecting statistical data about birth, outcome, and perceptions of legality.[2] I further achieve this by making all of the trial transcripts, press, and archival material that I use in my analysis available online at the close of my project.

What I will not make available, as should be clear from the opening paragraphs of this essay, are the interview transcripts and field notes that I collect as the bulk of the data for this project. Transparency, for research on sensitive topics with vulnerable populations, should be about transparency of *process*. As the Final

1 Though I should not be confused with Katherine Cramer (2015), my position on this issue mirrors hers.

2 I work with members of the Midwives Alliance of North America statistical research team (MANA Stats), as well as with a group of interdisciplinary scholars collaborating with MANA Stats. We have articles under review in medical and public health journals, and are in the process of creating a website that features searchable maps overlaying data relating to outcome, regulation, demographic measures, and scope of practice.

Report of QTD Working Group IV.3 ("Research on Vulnerable and Marginalized Populations") emphasizes, the process of peer-review for this work will focus on factors such as:

> the relationship between the time a scholar spent in their field site and their stated methodological approach; knowledge of the geographic variation/specificities; language skills and embeddedness; the use of local labor in the form of RAs, or facilitators; and discussion of how the political environment might have influenced their work (Lake et al. 2019, 3).

Data access for ethnographic and interview work—especially that work done with vulnerable populations—should be *access to my way of thinking and analyzing*, not access to those who participated in the research. Transparency about process and method, rather than transparency that enables an intrepid soul to find my field sites or study participants, is necessary not just because it keeps participants safe but because it enables them to have "security and peace of mind" (Lake et al. 2019, 6).

What is more, the research can neither be replicated,[3] nor reproduced, because it relies on *relationships*—my expertise, my showing up, their trust and capacity to share. No other researcher walking into the same situation would have the same access (some would have more, some less) or experience. A clear tenet of feminist political theory and critical race theory is that positionality, standpoint epistemology, and acknowledgment of embodied knowledge are tremendously important.[4] Simply put: my social identities influence my access and my interpretation. The relationships I build with participants also influence access and interpretation. While anyone could walk into the homes and offices of the people I interview, absent a relationship with them, the quality, content, and nature of the conversation would be different. Other researchers can have access, in other words (where safe for my participants), to the identities of those with whom I work; they cannot have access to the relationships we forge. But, as Schwedler et al. note, "ethnographers encounter, absorb, and process more data than could ever appear in field notes" (2019, 6).

In other words, even if I were to grant access to them, it must be understood that having my field notes is not the same thing as having my data. My data are, in part, embodied in my own memories of and experiences with the research project itself.

It is my job as an interpretive scholar engaging in embedded interview and fieldwork research to explain my process of data gathering, to be reflexive and clear about my relationship to the work and the participants, and to convince you of my interpretation of what I observed. I should be clear, in my work, about how many field sites I had, how many hours I spent in them, how many interviews I did, and how many informal conversations in which I participated. You should know which archives I visited and where the archival and web data I found can be accessed. I should be clear about how many pages of field notes and transcripts I worked from, and how those field notes and interviews contributed to the way I searched archival material. And, as a key part of a transparent process, I should be clear about how I analyzed and interpreted those notes, transcripts, and other data. These practices are all widely acknowledged to be "well established standards of evidence and agreed-upon means of evaluating whether claims are valid and have been adequately substantiated with evidence" (Schwedler et al. 2019, 5; citing Yanow 2014, 2009, 2006).

Instead of focusing on what may be a strawman argument at this point in the DA-RT debates, though, regarding whether my interview transcripts and field notes should be available via hyperlink to any journal reader who wants them, I'd prefer to focus on the question that I have heard posed, in good faith, from scholars who do not do interpretive work. They ask: "How do you know that you are getting the world right? Why should others give credence to your claims?"

I appreciate the question—because it is a reminder that we all work, even within the same discipline, from such disparate traditions. Indeed, 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 anyone can know about the "rightness" of my work relies on their 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) 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

3 Schwedler et al. (2019) make this clear at page 6: "Ethnographic work cannot be replicated."

4 There is a rich literature to consult, here. I often rely upon: Strolovitch 2013;Alexander-Floyd 2012; Hancock 2007; Milner 2007; England 1994; Wasserfall 1993; DeVault 1990; Collins 1986, as well as the essays collected in Alcoff and Potter (1993).

"right" becomes less important than the superordinate question: "Is my interpretation persuasive?" Or, "Is my interpretation plausible?" Or even better, I think, "Is this interpretation one that can shed light on related phenomena?"

Interpretive ethnographic and interview-based researchers do have standards for articulating answers to these questions. These questions come up routinely in peer reviews 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.[5] We have vibrant conversations about them, and we argue over whether a work achieves them, and in what ways. Those conversations are at the heart of our scholarly endeavor as a community—just as similar conversations are at the heart of those who practice other methodologies or speak to other traditions.

There is simply no need to recreate the wheel to include the work of interpretive scholars; and there is no need to create a state of exception for our work, either. We should expect data to be available where it is possible and understand and believe explanations when it is not. We should evaluate the processes by which data were gathered and analyzed and hold an expectation that good scholarship is indeed transparent in that regard. And we should take a deep breath and trust in the processes of mentorship, peer review, and data analyses that have brought us decades of good, valuable, and persuasive interpretive work.

Political Science has had crises, of late, that may make it feel difficult to do just this: to breathe deeply and trust.[6] I am not advocating naiveté, certainly—and I absolutely do not want to see a reduction in rigor and accountability for scholars, mentors, and reviewers. But I would argue that perhaps our discipline has more important crises to attend to than the data access and transparency concern raised by singular hoaxes and occasional lies. I am more concerned with the perception that our discipline lacks relevance to the very topics we purport to care most about: politics, policymaking, and political engagement.

Some argue, convincingly, that as journals in our field publish more and more statistical work and formal theory, they publish less work that includes policy analysis and policy recommendation (Desch 2019). Others allege that as we focus on speaking to policymakers, political scientists forget about speaking to the general public (Farrell and Knight 2019). Often, those most suited to speak to either constituency find themselves ignored. As is clear from the existence of successful movements like #WomenAlsoKnowStuff, many members of our discipline never get the phone call from a journalist, or the invitation to be on a panel even when we want to be relevant, simply because it is presumed that women might not actually "know stuff" about our field (Beaulieu et al. 2017). Let's not lose sight of the fact that much of the research done on issues that impact vulnerable populations and marginalized groups is produced by members of those communities themselves: women and feminist scholars, scholars of color, queer scholars, scholars with disabilities. When norms of the discipline make it more difficult for us to publish, and when those norms seem to construct barriers to the publication of studies meant to inform and improve policymaking for and politics by marginalized populations, we further reduce our relevance as a discipline.

Certainly, it may be easier to put statistical analyses through the paces of an elegant DA-RT procedure than it is to find peer reviewers who can read the nuance of an ethnographic methods section. But I am concerned that incentivizing that kind of ease in research and publication means we are missing—indeed turning our backs on—the kind of work that led many of us to the study of political science in the first place: data-informed policy analysis that enables us to understand how particular political manifestations and policies impact the daily lived experience of average, ordinary humans. If we want political science to be more accessible and transparent, an effort to speak to and write for policymakers and the general public—indeed, to make our work *accessible* to them—is a legitimate, and important, place to start.

5 For instance, bAoth *The International Review of Qualitative Research* and *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* devote much space to these issues. Other disciplines, such as Anthropology, also have spaces in which these conversations occur.

6 I am thinking of the LaCour data falsification scandal that rocked UCLA and the discipline in late 2015, among others, as well as the widely reported "Sokal Squared" hoax articles that came to light in 2018, which purported to show lack of rigor among journals dedicated primarily to women's and gender studies, queer theory, and post-modern theory.

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