Not There for the Taking: DA-RT and Policy Research

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Political scientists frequently study government policies—the tools that shape behaviors towards certain outcomes and allocate values in a society. Found in laws, administrative documents, court decrees, and the practices of government administrations, these tools are generally visible and available to the public. Therefore, one may assume that DA-RT—the APSA-sponsored initiative that requires scholars to reference the data they generate and provide other scholars with access to these data by depositing them in a "trusted digital repository"[1] —will not impede public policy researchers. In the pages that follow, I draw from my experience conducting research about sex work-related policies and political activism in the United States to challenge this assumption. To do this, I question DA-RT's conception of data and its understanding of (policy) research as an "extractive" enterprise (Pachirat 2015).

Sex work involves the exchange of sexual services for cash or other trade. In the United States, public policies variously define these services as legal (e.g., exotic dancing, pornography) and illegal (e.g., prostitution). My own research has considered sex workers' efforts in the San Francisco Bay Area to oppose criminalizing prostitution and create nonprofits that improve sex workers' occupational health and safety (e.g., Majic 2014a, c). I have also studied policy initiatives to "end demand" for prostitution and other forms of sex work in the US, including "john schools," where men arrested for soliciting a sex worker pay a fine and attend class to learn about consequences of their actions (Majic 2015), and public awareness campaigns (directed mainly at men) about the harms of prostitution (Majic 2017).

Like many other policies, prostitution laws and the details of "end demand" initiatives like john schools and public awareness campaigns are publicly available. Therefore, one may assume that these policies are easily "research-able" and that referencing them and providing other scholars with access to related data (e.g., the text of a state's prostitution law or a poster from a public awareness campaign) is a simple matter. But while such assumptions are certainly reasonable, they reflect and reinforce the power relations implied by DA-RT's model

of research, where, as Timothy Pachirat writes, "the researcher's relationship to the research world is *extractive* in nature and … transparency and openness are prized primarily in the inter-subjective relationships between researchers and other researchers, but not between the researcher and the research world from which he *extracts information* which he then *processes into data for analysis*" (2015, 29-30).

Put simply, DA-RT's "extractive ontology" (Pachirat 2015, 30) assumes that data are simply available for the researcher to take and share as she sees fit. While this may certainly apply to some forms of policy research that use data from large, publicly accessible sources (for example, studies assessing state crime statistics, or studies of the use of public programs over time), this is not the only way to study public policy. In fact, policy research may also be a highly *interactive* endeavor where data are *not* simply extracted and, by extension, easily shared.

My own studies of sex work-related policies have considered how sex workers resist policies (namely, laws criminalizing prostitution) and create alternative health and social services for their communities within an otherwise hostile "policyscape" (Mettler 2016). And, in my study of policy initiatives to "end demand" for prostitution, I have considered the implementation of john schools and public awareness campaigns to understand the normative discourses they convey and reinforce about sex work, gender, and race. To conduct these studies, I could not simply "appear" among sex worker rights activists or at john schools and "extract" the data I needed, such as interviews, documents, observations, and program histories and statistics.

Instead, to conduct my research, I had to develop relationships with different communities in order to access data. In my study of sex worker rights activism, this included relationships with individual sex worker activists and representatives from the nonprofits they formed, namely the St. James Infirmary (SJI), the world's only occupational health and safety clinic run by and for sex workers; and the California Prostitutes Education Project (CAL-PEP), which offers mobile HIV testing and other health services by and for sex workers and

1 http://www.dartstatement.org

members of other street-based communities. And in my studies of john schools and public awareness campaigns, I developed relationships with the representatives from the district attorneys' offices, police officers, and charitable organizations that oversee these programs in cities as diverse as New York, Phoenix, San Francisco, and Atlanta.

Certainly, one may ask why I needed to develop relationships to obtain data about these communities and programs. After all, they receive public funding, and they aren't "secret" in any way. However, this presumption is rooted in the "extractive" understanding of research, noted above, which is of limited use when studying marginalized communities like sex workers, who have long been subjects of research but rarely partners in the process (Bowen and O'Doherty 2014). As Gloria Lockett, CAL-PEP's founder and executive director explained to me, she was "sick of mostly white researchers coming to the [sex worker] community, taking what they needed, and leaving" (Majic 2014b, 12). And in john schools, the administrators were often concerned about protecting the privacy of the men in the classes, and they were also often anxious about what I might write about their programs.

As a result, my access to research sites and communities has *depended on* establishing trust and engaging in some kind of exchange. In my research with CAL-PEP and the SJI, for example, in exchange for interviews and access to program data, I volunteered as a grant writer and helped with various tasks at these organizations, such as filling baskets of condoms and doing the dishes. To visit the john schools and conduct interviews with individuals who initiated and ran various public awareness campaigns, I agreed to various conditions (e.g., not recording the john school classes) and offered to share anything I wrote and published about their programs. In all cases, the research participants presumed that I would be the sole proprietor of any notes I took during interviews, while observing john school classes, etc.

Many scholars have expressed concerns in various articles and through the Qualitative Transparency Deliberations (QTD) process (among other forums) that the DA-RT initiative will force researchers to make data such as interview and field notes widely available when they publish in subscribing journals. DA-RT proponents have responded that this is not the case, particularly where privacy and confidentiality risks exist.[2] While I

generally side with DA-RT's critics in these debates, I raise here a slightly different concern: How does DA-RT ensure that those who access data that were originally collected and made available by scholars who conduct *reciprocal, interactive* policy research *also* develop trust and relationships with the communities under study?

To illustrate this concern, my time at the SJI is instructive. Here, among other things, I wrote grants and helped out during clinic nights in exchange for conducting interviews with staff and accessing organizational documents. In one instance, a grant application that I submitted to the National Minority AIDS Coalition funded a new computer for the SJI's community room. Now, if the journals in which I published my research had been DA-RT subscribers at the time, they might have asked me to make my interview and observation notes available to other scholars. Presumably, I would have asked the editors to exempt my interview notes (sex workers are, after all, a marginalized community, and many of my interviewees did not want me to use their names or other identifying information). But perhaps the journals would have required me to share my observation notes from my time at the clinic.

My concerns about sharing these notes are two-fold and extend from my practice of reciprocal, interactive policy research. First, to collect the data contained in these notes, I had to expend a significant amount of "sweat equity" to develop the relationships and trust needed to access my research sites. How is it fair to me, then, for another scholar to access my notes when he or she has done none of the (often frustrating and time-consuming) relationship-building work? Second, and more significantly, how can I guarantee that the researcher who accesses my data will *also* offer something to the community/organization studied? For example, will he also write a grant to the National Minority AIDS Coalition to obtain a (second) computer as "thanks" for the data?

Certainly, expressing such concerns may cast me in a petty and selfish light (or, at the very least, as someone with something to hide); however, this is not my intent or motivation. Instead, I raise these concerns to indicate how DA-RT inadvertently encourages a particular type of top-down policy research with data that are publicly available and easy to obtain. While such research is certainly important, ease of data access should not be the key indicator of "good" (transparent, publishable)

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2 For a more detailed discussion of this debate, see the 2015 issue of the Qualitative and Multimethod Research Newsletter (Various Authors 2015) and work published by DA-RT's key spokespeople (Lupia and Elman 2013). The QTD discussions and reports are available at https://www.qualtd.net.

public policy research. Instead, as the QTD Report "Vulnerable and Marginalized Populations (Working Group IV.3)" indicates, we can assess the quality of research by reviewing the extent to which authors *explain their process* of generating and analyzing evidence (Lake, Majic, and Maxwell 2019). With this standard, scholars are better able to pursue and publish policy research that involves data that may be difficult to access and share, as they would not be expected to provide it in raw form. Instead, they would have to explain their collection and analysis process so others may understand (and even replicate) their methods and assess the veracity of their findings and conclusions.

Given the range of policies that impact our lives on a minute-by-minute basis, I believe the discipline of political science must encourage research on a wide range of policy questions with diverse sources of data. By ignoring policy research that requires interactions, relationships, and reciprocation, DA-RT's "extractive" ontology may just encourage the opposite.

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