If My Participants Say, "You're Wrong" Does it Mean I Really Am?

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In addition to the sharing of their lives, part of the close relationship that participants can have with researchers is an interest in the research project itself. Some participants are curious about the inner workings of the project and how researchers intend to use the information gleaned from field site visits. This subject differs from existing literature on the ethnographic endeavor. Some work focuses on the identity of the researchers and the implications for the relationship with key participants (Rabinow 1977). Other work, however, examines the challenges of inviting participants into the writing process (Shokeid 1997). The following discussion also considers the dilemmas encountered when participants become part of the analysis and writing process. Unlike previous work, it examines the point at which an analyst has several ideas on paper rather than a full manuscript. Additionally, it looks at a stage past the research design period.[1] Specifically, this essay addresses the following questions: Should researchers make significant adjustments when participants view them as incorrect? Are there additional factors at work that account for the discrepancy between participant and researcher interpretations?

Answering these questions is important in light of previous research that suggests the purpose of member-checking is to ensure quality (Schwartz-Shea 2014, 135). To this end, I will argue that participant claims that the researcher is wrong does not necessarily signify that the project has no validity. Rather, taking participant views into account in a critical way allows researchers to determine whether legitimate revisions are needed or whether there are factors beyond the researchers' control at play. To that end, this paper will first address the nature of my original research project, which triggered these questions. Second, it will examine how member-checking featured in my research, and the effect that it had. Finally, it will suggest four ways in which researchers can take their participants' perspectives seriously without entirely discarding their projects.

The Original Project and Member-Checking

My original research dealt with identity formation and resistance among ethnic minority groups in China. It asked two questions: Why do ethnic minorities in China express aspects of their ethnic identity despite the possibility of repression? How are their identities produced and reproduced over time? I operationalized ethnic expression as holiday celebrations, and argued that these gatherings, in the tradition of *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott 1985), constituted a form of protest called "ritual resistance" that reinforced ethnic identity. I argued that during these celebrations, ethnic minorities share stories, songs, and relevant political information. Those who engage in traditional protest are at higher risk for detention and legal action than their Western counterparts. Thus, much like Scott's research participants, Chinese ethnic minorities were not passive political subjects, but rather found innovative ways around state restrictions.

The prospect that the ideas presented here could be "wrong" came about during a Uyghur language tutoring session during my fieldwork in 2015. My tutor, Rahile, took an interest in this project and requested a summary of my argument in Uyghur. After reading three or four lines she stopped and said, "Why do you think this? This is wrong." After I explained that the breakdown was ahead, she read two or three more sentences and maintained her position: "I really don't know why you think this." My examples of politically significant songs about the Uyghur homeland were not enough to convince her: "We just like the songs. They don't really mean anything" (Rahile, personal communication, January 2, 2015).

This conversation made me wonder whether I was too invested in my own ideas when they did not fit with how participants understood their experiences, forcing a conceptual and theoretical fit where none existed. Baogang He, a scholar of Public Policy and Global Affairs at Deakin University in Australia, writes: "Often studies that aim to use China to validate Western theories

and concepts are irrelevant to China's reality" (He 2011, 270). Thus, researchers may be inaccurately rendering the analysis by applying these concepts to what participants report.

When my tutor said that I was "wrong," I became concerned that I was inappropriately applying concepts. A number of my participants made it clear they viewed their actions neither as political nor as resistance. Thus, it was possible I was working with a particular conception of resistance in a part of the world where it did not apply. At the same time, however, while my participants are experts on their own lives, their experiences by themselves do not constitute new knowledge. In this sense, it is important to acknowledge that there are times when concepts do not fit, but also recognize that a participant's view that researchers are "wrong" does not mean that the research is "wrong." The following four suggestions will demonstrate how researchers can make similar adjustments.

What is the Nature of "Politics?"

What led Rahile to question the validity of the motivating theory was a fundamentally different understanding of politics. As she explained, "Politics is what the government does, not us" (Rahile, personal communication, January 2, 2015). She was uncomfortable with a characterization of her and other Uyghurs' behavior as "political." In the American context, however, the use of "In God We Trust" license plates can be considered a political expression of banal nationalism (Airriess, Hawkins, and Vaughan 2012, 50). The chasm between how Rahile viewed political action and how ordinary Americans view it suggests a need to take seriously what constitutes "the political."

Other scholars have explored what constitutes "the political" and why it matters. Michael Schatzberg makes this argument in *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa,* pointing out that Western political scientists assume that what they understand as political in their own context transfers seamlessly elsewhere. In particular, American scholars tend to assume a separateness of politics and religion. This same separateness does not exist in Africa, and Schatzberg implores scholars to think broadly about the state and politics to allow a role for the spiritual world, sports, and business. It is easy to assume that separateness of religion and the state exists the same way in other contexts as it does in the United States, but in doing so, researchers miss key dynamics of interest (Schatzberg 2001, 108-09).

Schatzberg's admonition applies to the research under consideration here. Rahile's (2015) statement, "Politics is what the government does," also raises the question: "What are politics?" In the Chinese context, however, the answer to this question suggests a need to restrict the realm of politics rather than widen it further. Another discussion with Rahile is instructive here. We discussed the concept of "family politics," and in particular, examples regarding how adult Americans negotiate relationships with their families of origin. The term "politics," however, did not resonate with Rahile. Interestingly, she was not opposed to the description of the dynamic. Instead, she replied, "No, we don't say 'family politics.' We say 'family relationships'" (Rahile, personal communication, January 2, 2015). The point she makes here harkens back to the idea that politics is purely the realm of the state. It is separate from the familial sphere; individuals in China would not think to marry the two.

In this sense, then, when participants say that a conceptualization is incorrect, they may take issue only with the term used. The dynamics at play do in fact exist. Holger Albrecht makes a similar point in "The Nature of Political Participation," writing that political participation can be found in any political system, whether democratic or authoritarian (Albrecht 2008, 15). In a similar spirit (if entirely different context), Locke and Thelen (1995) make what they call "contextualized comparisons," in which they compare "sticking points" across labor movements in advanced industrial economies (343). Although the sources of labor conflicts are different, they are still considered "analytically parallel" in the sense that they "capture the particular way that common challenges have been translated into specific conflicts in the various national settings" (Locke and Thelen 1995, 344). Thinking about concepts in this way, whether the nature of political participation or labor struggles allow researchers to make different kinds of comparisons. Nonetheless, there still seems to be a conflict with regard to differences in the nature of politics: If there are realms of society that are not considered political, arguing that people are in fact engaging in political action is difficult. Reconciling the two viewpoints is possible, however. Albrecht (2008) goes on to write that the political regime determines how leaders feel about political participation, and that this will ultimately shape outcomes, forms, and channels of participation (17). In other words, politics comes from the government, and it is thus the

state's interpretation of people's behavior that makes it possible to say that political participation exists under all regime types.

The above discussion demonstrates that there is no conflict, then, between a theory of resistance and Rahile's (2015) statement that "Politics is what the government does." Politics is indeed what the government does, and it is that fact that allows the Chinese party-state to view ethnic minority actions as political. Thus, ethnic minorities in China may not view their holiday celebrations as political, and they are right, at least as far as their perception of their behavior. The Chinese party-state, on the other hand, has decided that holidays are political and will view minority gatherings through that lens. In this sense, there is no need to abandon the project as a whole due to participants' disagreement. Rather, there are ways to reconcile both views.

It is also worth considering that whether participants and researchers agree on a particular behavior's characterization does not change the fact that there are power dynamics at play. Researchers may nonetheless ask whether they should label this behavior as political. In *The Spectacular State* (2010), Laura Adams demonstrates why this need not be a concern. While studying how Uzbek political elites used culture to create a nation-building program, she found that she and her participants were in disagreement about perceptions of their behavior. She handles the issue by labeling her work as a "partial perspective" of an outside observer, noting that her theories of power and agency are different from her participants' views (183). She also points out that there exist identity differences: Adams is a scholar who "deconstruct[s] power dynamics that they [her participants] might not be fully aware of" (183). Her participants, in contrast, are artists and are thus more invested in communicating the value of their work than engaging in scholarly discourse. She readily admits that she was not always persuaded by their views of their behavior, but that it was likely that they did not always find her persuasive. Nonetheless, Adams claims the work as her analysis (183).

In the case of my research project, it is possible to draw a similar parallel. Like Adams' interlocutors, my participants viewed the project from a different perspective. My participants' identities are more invested either as spokespeople for their cultures or as individuals going about their own lives. My identity as a scholar requires that I theorize and explain social behavior. Thus, their disagreement that holidays are political could very well have arisen from the fact that they do not have a theoretical perspective or even an interest in viewing their behavior from that perspective. To fully accept my participants' viewpoint would necessitate the abandonment of my identity as a scholar and the project as a whole.

Ascertaining the nature of politics in a particular context, in line with Schatzberg's (2001) admonition, is certainly necessary to making an accurate interpretation of one's data. There is a sense in which Schatzberg's point is correct: "What are politics?" is a key question to ask when studying contexts other than one's own. In the case of China, "politics" are the purview of the state and not ordinary people. While my views on politics diverge from those of my participants, this disagreement does not connote a permanent impasse. If politics comes from the state in China, then that lens will be the most appropriate with which to view the actions of ordinary people. In this sense, there is far less of a conflict than what originally seemed to be the case: individuals' actions are political because the state sees them that way.

To bridge the gap between my conceptualization of what was happening in the field and my participants' views, I revised my theory so that it retained a portion of my original thought process, but also reflected how my participants saw their behavior. Rather than state that my observations simply constituted yet another form of resistance, I acknowledged that their celebrations at home were indeed apolitical in nature. I did so, however, not only on the basis of what they stated in interviews, but also what I observed at the field sites. In this sense, I was incorporating their views rather than taking them at face value. Next, I contrasted the apolitical nature of home celebrations with the highly politicized character of state celebrations, arguing that the home celebrations, even with their apolitical character, have implications for ethnic minorities' relationship with the Chinese party-state. In short, I found myself in a position where I agreed with my participants that their personal holiday celebrations were not political in nature. I did not agree, however, that personal holiday celebrations were insignificant. Feedback from initial readers of the project suggested that revising the entire project based solely on what participants had to say would have been problematic, but that revisions backed by my own observations were appropriate and even necessary in this case. Thus, these are not circumstances in which a researcher should abandon the project. Rather, considering the differences among ways in which the nature of politics may differ from context to context is instructive in understanding why such disagreements arise.

What is the Nature of "Political Science?"

If it makes sense to ask about the nature of politics in a particular context, it is also worth asking how individuals understand political science. One reason why participants may view a researcher's conclusions as incorrect is that there is a disconnect regarding the understanding of a particular academic discipline. When discussing my project with graduate students at Central University for the Nationalities in Beijing, one of them responded, "This is political science?" When I asked whether he shared the interpretation that holidays are indeed politicized in China, he replied, "Oh they definitely are. You're right about that. It's just that this research sounds like an anthropology or sociology project. What does it have to do with political science?" (Personal communication, March 4, 2014). After learning more about how Chinese students and scholars view political science, the reaction began to make sense. While it is true that these graduate students were not "members" in the sense that I did not interview them, their perspective is still valuable in the sense that it provides context for interpreting what other participants may say about interview transcripts or manuscripts. This is especially true of the participants in the research project considered here, as most of them were students. To acquiesce to participants on this matter would entail a total abandonment of the research, as there is no way to reconcile these views. Thus, an explanation of how political science is understood in China is instructive here.

A pro-government approach tends to dominate political studies in China. In the Chinese context, political studies are in service of the political system and economic development. There are several ways in which this is the case. The first is the type of research the state funds. Funding tends to be directed toward Chinese diplomacy and socialist theory. In addition, former government leaders also find their way into formal academic appointments. For example, Zhu Rongji, China's premier from 1998-2003, was Founding Dean of the School of Economics and Management at Tsinghua University in Beijing. These arrangements are about material exchange in the sense that the university is expected to benefit the officials in some way, and the name recognition the official bestows is advantageous with regard to funding. Finally, those engaged in political studies act as government consultants rather than pursue independent scholarly study. Ultimately, their primary aim is to develop policies for the state (He 2011).

The differences extend to political science departments and writing. Wu (2011) observes that it is uncommon in Chinese universities to find courses on Chinese domestic politics. In addition, departments of political science are few and far between; rather, they are typically referred to as "public administration." Scholars in other social sciences and humanities fields such as sociology and history tend to focus on political science topics as understood in the American context. In addition, party-state dominated political writings, such as reflective opinions and policy discussions, are often misunderstood as political science. These are generally statements in support of the government. There is, in reality, very little criticism or reflection (Wu 2011). In short, there is no real boundary between policy discussion and scholarly work in the Chinese context. Thus, the characterization here indicates that a work on holiday celebrations' political characteristics would not fit with the Chinese understanding of political writing.

These points demonstrate that there are real differences between the American and Chinese contexts with regard to political science. Chinese graduate students' surprise at the nature of my project is thus understandable. They would characterize my research as sociology or anthropology, where matters of Chinese society are studied. Accepting my participants' views regarding my conclusions, in the end, would require abandoning the project because research that is not tied to a state agenda is not understood as political science. This matter is entirely outside the researcher's control and does not indicate faulty interpretation. In this sense, disagreement between researcher and participant does not suggest the project has no validity. Researchers should thus consider whether a different understanding of political science as an academic field is what accounts for the reason participants say, "you got it wrong."

Understand and Document Differences among Participants

The statement, "my participants said I was wrong," can lead one to ask the question, "which participants?" Each participant has a different background and varied experiences that lead him or her to respond in one way or another. Taking these factors into account is helpful both in interpreting responses and thinking about what participants mean when they say a conclusion is incorrect. They can also account for disagreements between researchers and participants. In this sense, there is no reason to change the direction of one's research. Rather,

it is instead necessary to document these differences with the purpose of exploring the reasons why participants might not agree with the researchers' conclusions, or with one another.

My February 2015 field site visit to Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in China's northwest sheds light on this situation. During a visit to a local's home for Tibetan New Year, Tinley, a monk at a local monastery, asked for additional details regarding the nature of my project. After telling him more about my research design and guiding theory, he stated that he agreed with the argument that holiday celebrations serve as a form of covert resistance, stating, "it's a chance for us to be ourselves" (Tinley, personal communication, February 20, 2015). Another participant, a local tour guide named Chodak, had a different response to the argument. "No, I think you're wrong," he responded. "These holidays aren't political. They're just a time to be with family and for me to take care of my mom" (Chodak, personal communication, February 20, 2015). Although these responses appear contradictory, they are not too different from one another. Both reflect an appreciation of Tibetan culture, seen in the focus on being oneself and on family. They also reflect a lack of emphasis on government and politics in the sense that these are not relevant factors for these participants. Yet Chodak disagreed with my argument while Tinley did not.

What may account for the difference here is personal background and priorities. Politics are not part of Chodak's identity. Throughout the field site visit, he made several remarks indicating that he thought festivals were becoming too political. Earlier in the visit, he commented that the Spring Festival Gala (*chunwan*), a televised variety show, was simply political propaganda. He remarked, "I think it's really political and the government wants to use it to teach people about that stuff. But I don't think it should be for that. I don't think it should be political at all. The holiday should just be a time to be with family." (Chodak, personal communication, February 17, 2015). Chodak often spoke of his commitment to his family, and that is reflected in his comment. It is hardly surprising, then, that he did not see Tibetan New Year as political. Tinley, on the other hand, given the political repression surrounding religion in Tibet, is more likely to view cultural expressions in political terms. In recent years, monasteries have faced destruction, and there have been cases of self-immolation as a form of protest (Makley 2015). Tinley's identity as a monk may perhaps be more implicated here than Chodak's, potentially accounting for the difference between how the two men viewed my theory.

This discussion between Chodak and Tinley clearly demonstrates how two participants could come to different conclusions regarding the same theory. Interestingly, there is little substantive difference between their views. Stating that the holidays are a time to be with family and that they are a time to be oneself both suggest that Tibetan New Year is a time to leave politics aside. Both men, particularly Chodak, found the government intervention in the holiday unpalatable. The way in which they viewed that intervention as individuals, however, may have related to their respective backgrounds. It is plausible that a tour guide, whose main concern is supporting his family, is going to have a very different attitude than a monk who is faced with government restriction more frequently.

The ultimate lesson from this fieldwork experience is that Chodak and Tinley's views of their individual lived experiences are not synonymous with theoretical analysis. Each of them interpreted my theory through their own personal lens. Should each participant do the same, there is the potential for there to be as many judgments on a researcher's theory as there are participants. In this sense, each participant's personal view cannot be the arbiter on whether the research is headed in the right direction. Some will say it is correct, while some will inevitably say it is wrong. Considering the background and priorities of each participant, however, can give the researcher a better sense of why a participant has a particular attitude. There is no need, then, to give up on the research project because of different understandings. Rather, it is best to document these differences to allow them to give a richness to the data.

When Writing, Do Adjust when Your Observations and Those of Your Participants Line Up

According to Kapiszewski, Maclean, and Read (2015), there may be times that researchers begin to sense that what they observe in the field does not conform to their original expectations. Researchers may be wrong because they have not gone deep enough in the field, they may not have known enough about the topic prior to beginning their fieldwork, or they may discover that their theory is a poor fit for what they are observing (Kapiszewski, Maclean, and Read 2015). While these authors begin with the premise that the researcher discovers he is wrong and develop their advice from

that starting point, the same advice can be applicable when participants suggest that the researcher is wrong. There may be times when participants have a point and are trying to tell the researcher something, and for that reason, it is worth reevaluating the original theory.

My own work serves as an instructive example. The original theory conceived of ethnic minority holiday celebrations as opportunities to engage in covert resistance. In this manner, songs became thinly veiled criticisms of the state, and food was a way of explicitly reinforcing a culture different from the dominant one. Participants would exchange news regarding conflict between minorities and the state, ensuring that these events would never be forgotten, despite government efforts to cover them up. Thus, holiday celebrations also demonstrated the potential for future mobilization.

In addition to participants stating that holiday celebrations did not serve this purpose, I never observed anything that would indicate that they did. For the ethnic minorities I observed, their celebrations were about festive meals, light conversation, and connecting with family and friends. Thus, when participants stated that I was "wrong," there was a sense in which they were right. Holiday celebrations were not political in the way I had originally thought. What was not incorrect, however, was that these holidays were relevant for politics. In the end, I still argued that these holidays nonetheless showed resistance because the Chinese party-state interprets these actions as such. Thus, it is the government's interpretation, which is still in line with ordinary people's view that politics is the purview of the state, that drives my interpretation of minority behavior.

Making adjustments in this way allowed me to both honor participant views and make a theoretically relevant contribution. There was no need to jump to the conclusion that the research had no validity. Rather, a reassessment was useful in steering the project in a different direction. In short, there was a sense in which my participants were "right" to say that I was "wrong." There was no feasible way in which to make the behavior I observed conform to the original theory. In this sense, it was prudent to follow Kapiszewski, Maclean, and Read's (2015) prescriptions for making adjustments. Nevertheless, where I still differed from my participants was in the realm of whether behavior was political. I acknowledged that they did not view their behavior as political while still maintaining that even this behavior had political significance. Thus, making adjustments is possible without abandoning the project.

Conclusion

To reach the current phase of the project, I have made adjustments to my original argument that incorporates a number of my participants' insights, but that leaves others behind, particularly those that would render the research invalid. If ordinary people in China do not engage in politics, then political science as Americans understand it is not possible, and that would discount a number of works on the creative ways in which people protest the state. Nonetheless, there were places where what I observed and what my participants thought they were doing lined up—we agreed on the finding that holidays are political for the state but not for ordinary people. That was my way of not forging ahead with my original idea when it no longer made sense, but still showing how it was politically relevant.

I have suggested four ways in which researchers can retool and make adjustments when participants say they are "wrong." When this happens, there is no need to abandon the project and begin again. As this paper has demonstrated, the research is not necessarily invalid. Researchers should first consider what constitutes politics in their field site and acknowledge those differences. Second, an understanding of what it means to be a political scientist is also necessary, as it is possible that researchers and participants understand the field differently. Third, working to document differences among participants can help shed light on "multiplicities of understanding." Finally, making adjustments may be necessary in the end, as it was for me. I only came to this conclusion, however, after reevaluating the observations I made. Thus, being told one is "wrong" does not have to be a crisis. Rather, it is an opportunity to more fully engage with participants and produce richer and more robust writing.

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Member-Checking: Lessons from the Dead

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I sat back in the faded red chair, happy to see Bhuti for the first time in more than a year.[1] We exchanged the usual pleasantries. He asked about my wife. I asked about how the *majita* (wise guys) were doing. Bhuti named three young men who had died since the last time we had seen each other. The only name I knew was of an informal mechanic and alleged sometime car hijacker with whom I had a dispute several years earlier about repairs he performed on a car I owned. When I asked Bhuti what had happened, he replied, "He was sick"—a semantically-vague yet commonly-used code for HIV (Personal comm. recorded in field notes, December 23, 2016). I grunted an affirmation.

Bhuti then, excitedly, mentioned a fourth name— Vernon—because he had only died a few days earlier.

When I looked at him quizzically, Bhuti said that Vernon was a local drug dealer and insisted I knew him. I had encountered several such men during the roughly twenty months I had spent researching crime, policing, and vigilantism in South Africa. In this case, I could vaguely place Vernon's name but couldn't remember having met him. Bhuti sprang from the couch, walked into the adjacent kitchen, and returned with a local paper specializing in news from Durban's million-strong Indian community. Staring at me from the page was the placid face of an Indian man who looked just a few years younger than me. I didn't recognize him but quickly read through the story.

The newspaper reported that Vernon was shot nine times while sitting in his car a few streets away from where

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1 Except when referring to events or individuals described in publicly available sources, names are pseudonyms to provide anonymity to research subjects.