Ethnography and Participant Observation

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Introduction

Although rarely framed in terms of research transparency, ethnographers routinely engage in important practices of research openness. For instance, ethnographers often describe how they accessed field sites or research interlocutors and what roadblocks prevented other potential research paths (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Ethnographers consider the ways in which their subject position – for example, one's gender, racial, or ethnic background, class position, or nationality – and enmeshment in webs of power may shape the kinds of insights they produce (Shehata 2006; Pachirat 2009; Lichterman 2017).[1] They may discuss their prior theoretical assumptions and discuss how the experience of field work changed these assumptions (Cramer 2015). They may describe the emotional strains, challenges, or dangers they or their interlocutors experienced during research (Sanjek 1990, 398–400). They will typically discuss why and how they went about protecting research participants, potentially including choices for anonymization, data protection practices, data destruction after a certain period, and reasons why data may not be available for sharing (Parkinson and Wood 2015).

These broad lessons emerged from our discussions with ethnographers and from a review of the literature on research openness in ethnography. It is important to note, however, that in our efforts to elicit a broad discussion among ethnographers about questions relating to transparency as a general concept, we were met with much resistance as to whether such a conversation should even take place. Some expressed that they were unwilling to participate in this process because "transparency" is not a meaningful concept for ethnography, at least not in the sense it is used in much positivist and quantitative research.[2] Many also felt that participating in this conversation, and particularly engaging the terms of the DA-RT debate, would legitimize a set of critiques that are not only irrelevant to ethnographers, but also potentially destructive to the kind of work ethnographers do.[3] Thus this statement aims to

[1] William J. Kelleher, "Limits to Transparency," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, December 26, 2016.
[2] On the difficulties regarding the relationship between the language of transparency and ethnography, see Pachirat (2015).
[3] On the knowledge politics of DA-RT and the challenges it poses for ethnographers, see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2016).

capture the full range of views on the issue, building from the open online discussions but including concerns and reservations expressed to us privately.

Defining the Method

There are important disagreements among ethnographers about what the method entails. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that ethnography's core activity is participant-observation, meaning "immersion in a community, a cohort, a locale, or a cluster of related subject positions" (Schatz 2009, 5). That is, ethnography is more than just in-depth interviewing or visiting a given field site for an extended period, although it likely involves such activities. Rather, the researcher pays attention to not only specific questions the researcher seeks to answer but also immerses herself in the broader meaning-laden context in which her interlocutors live. This could include participating in rituals, attending rallies, ceremonies, or other important events, joining interlocutors for daily activities like meals or errands, and generally engaging deeply with the daily life of one's subjects. Such immersion is guided by an "ethnographic sensibility" (Pader 2006) that challenges taken for granted assumptions about the categories and practices that make up the world by trying to see those categories through the eyes of one's interlocutors. The effect is for the researcher to distance herself from the etic categories through which she sees the world and adopt an emic perspective – both to understand the locality she is researching and to reflect back on the categories through which she sees the world.[4]

What Might Research Openness Look like for Ethnographers?

Ethnographers do not share a single understanding of what research openness means or what such openness should look like. While there may be some shared understandings and expectations, specific questions of openness "for whom," and "how" best to engage in research openness might change from question to question or site to site with the answers changing accordingly. Furthermore, ethnographers grapple not only with questions of openness vis-a-vis the scholarly community, but also in our research sites and with our interlocutors when we are in the field. With that in mind, there were a number of practices that participants in our discussion highlighted as being part of their understanding of openness in ethnography. They should not be assumed to be universally shared or applicable to every project. They do not establish a standard set of "best practices." Instead, we hope the practices outlined below will offer some insights into how and when ethnography might be transparent, as well as the challenges that some understandings of transparency pose to this particular research method.

The first theme around transparency focused on communicating the goals and designs of our research projects to the audiences for our scholarship.[5] Much good scholarship clearly states its goals. However, the goals of a work of ethnographic political science might look a little different

[4] Other scholars have offered excellent, extended discussions of the method that do not require repeating here. For particularly good examples, see Schatz (2009) and Wedeen (2010).
[5] Ben Read, "The Benefits of Transparency in Ethnography," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, December 30, 2016.

from the goals of research using other research methods. When ethnographers clearly communicate their goals—what they seek to explain, uncover, or explore and how those insights help us understand politics in other times or places—it is easier for other scholars to evaluate the work on its own terms. If ethnographers can head off questions like: “but how much variation can you explain?” or “what are the scope conditions of analysis?” with clearly stated research goals their analysis might be more transparent to others. For example, an ethnographer might clearly state that they aim to make causal claims but that they are not identifying “necessary” or “sufficient” conditions. Or they might say they are developing conceptual frameworks that can travel to other times and places, but that the precise relationship between processes and events evidenced in their case is unlikely to appear again (see Simmons 2016 for a discussion of both examples).

Ethnographers might also want to be clear about the motivations for or origins of their project (a practice not limited to ethnography, but certainly suggested by other facets of the method).[6] Transparency around motivation or origins might help other scholars understand the context that shaped the project. This kind of openness might add important information to enhance a reader’s understanding of why some decisions in the field (or in the research design process) were made. It might shed light on how and why a researcher was able to have the conversations that she had and why she sought to have them in the first place.

Similar questions apply to research design. A discussion of process of selection of field sites—why particular sites and not others were chosen for research—is often not only possible but also desirable. For example, such a discussion might help readers better understand the context in which the ethnographer was working, highlight the challenges of accessing possible research sites, and illuminate why unexpected paths for designing research may have been taken.

A second theme that emerged in the discussion related to openness about the process of conducting research. In particular, how researchers got access to particular sites can often offer valuable information.[7] For example, access can come through formal requests, personal connections, or chance encounters, and that information can be very useful in helping the reader evaluate the research. Ethnographers can also often detail how much time they spent in particular places and with particular people and why.

Ethnographers can also often be open about their daily routines in the field, as well as how they interacted with interlocutors.[8] How a researcher recorded his or her observations in the field can usually be shared (did they notes while interacting with interlocutors? Notes afterwards? Tape recordings?). What the researcher shared with his or her interlocutors about the goals of the research is also often something that can be included. Additional information on what the researcher told the people with whom he or she was interacting about him or herself, about the

[6] Ben Read, "The Benefits of Transparency in Ethnography," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, December 30, 2016.
[7] Useful examples of discussions of how research access challenges sheds light on theoretical work include Pachirat (2011) and Fassin (2013).
[8] Samantha Majic, "Transparency and Day-to-Day Fieldwork," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, September 7, 2016;

research project, and potentially about the sources of funding can help readers understand of the research and analysis process.[9]

Finally, ethnographers also often have an opportunity for transparency in discussions of how they analyzed and engaged with the data they gathered. Ethnographers could, for example, describe how they ensured that they were constantly challenging their own assumptions or tentative conclusions. Similarly, ethnographers might want to discuss the aspects of the work that structured their inferences, including relationships, power, and processes of reflexivity (Shehata 2006; Pachirat 2009). They could also discuss how their insights might translate beyond the specific research sites in which they are immersed and suggest what the limits of those findings to other research areas might be. Lastly, they can explain how and why their thinking changed over time.

As should be clear, there are many ways in which ethnographers already are and can be transparent about their work (for examples see Soss 1999; Pachirat 2011; Fujii 2009; Cramer 2016). Yet ethnographers face a number of challenges when thinking about how to make their work transparent. Perhaps the most critical challenge is posed by the question with which we open this section—transparency can mean different things to different scholars. When ethnographers adopt understandings of transparency that aren't necessarily appropriate for the method, they often find themselves unable to fit themselves into a mold that might work for other approaches to studying politics.

Assessing the Validity of Ethnographic Research

Indeed, while the positivist language of transparency and replication is inappropriate for much ethnographic work, that does not mean that claims cannot be challenged, nor that there are not standards for evaluating ethnographic research. One standard could be called "research validity": does the research say what it claims it does and is it presented in a cogent manner that shows the logic of the argument in a compelling light (Sanjek 1990, 395; see also Yanow 2006, 102)? Do the findings find support in the ethnographic data provided in the article or book? Do the interpretations match the data presented? Could the data reasonably be interpreted in another way? If so, does the ethnographer account for why she has interpreted the data as she has, as opposed to from a different perspective?

Yet research validity, particularly when considered through a positivist lens, is often considered next to a second key term: verification (Pool 2017). How does one verify the veracity of research of research typically performed by a lone researcher in a specific, potentially anonymous location? Verification – and many ethnographers will bristle at the term (van de Port 2017) – by other researchers typically comes first in the review process and then after publication, when scholars knowledgeable about the field site and topic weigh in on whether the research findings comport with their own experience and the extant literature. New ethnographic work often contributes to building a richer picture of what is happening, and particularly of what different

[9] Useful examples of discussions of how daily research routines shaped research findings include Cramer Walsh (2009) and Cramer (2016).

peoples understand to be happening. If it “disproves” an earlier study, it does so by revealing that other process, practices, or meanings were at work.

As such, ethnographic work is constantly subject to processes that positivist epistemologies might recognize as “testing” and “transparency.” That is, it must convince numerous experts on the same topic and field site of the validity of their claims. They do so by presenting rich empirical material, which is then evaluated by others in terms of whether it fits with their knowledge and experience. The presentation of this material could come in many forms. For some projects, extended quotations of an exchange with interlocutors accompanied by a detailed description of context (e.g. see Cramer 2016) is appropriate. For others, lengthy descriptions of experiences or exchanges are better suited to the analysis (e.g. Wedeen 2008). Other scholars evaluating the material might disagree with the researcher’s interpretation of events or utterances; while ethnographers often accept the possibility of multiple, potentially contradictory understandings of the same data, the field itself is not without conflict or disagreement. Arguably, a hallmark of good ethnographic work is to represent disagreements in a field site (to the extent that they exist) and highlight how and why such disagreements impact the ethnographer’s arguments or theories.

For scholars adopting positivist and particularly quantitative approaches, such “testing” for “validity” will not feel adequate because it is so dissimilar to what they do. But it bears stating that all interpretivist approaches, including ethnography, have well established standards of evidence and agreed-upon means of evaluating whether claims are valid and have been adequately substantiated with evidence (see e.g. Yanow 2006, 2009, 2014). Ethnographers do not simply make claims and ask their readers to trust them. They make claims that must persuade others in the know, while highlighting processes or ideas that could not be unearthed through other methods. The level of knowledge about a particular locale is extraordinarily high in ethnographic research, so that any fabricated story would be quickly discovered by those possessing expertise in that area. The ethnographic work that other researchers engage all meets this bar; scholarship that does not is quickly critiqued and forgotten, if it is published at all.

Thus, many participants in our discussions emphasized that ethnographers already have established practices and standards for evaluating evidence and research findings, but they are very different from those of many other approaches. “Transparency” is a concept that does not travel well into interpretive epistemologies (e.g. Pachirat 2015)—the concept implies that everything can be rendered visible in ways chafe with interpretive understandings—but ethnography does have means of conveying to other researchers precisely how conclusions were reached. In the next section, we discuss in greater detail what transparency means for ethnographers, and how they can help non-ethnographers to understand their standards and methods better. We advocate a kind of transparency not to mirror positivist modes of data sharing which have been proposed in various disciplinary and editorial policies, but to more clearly articulate the standards for evaluating the validity of ethnographic research and conclusions.

What Transparency Cannot Achieve in Ethnographic Research

The most common concern expressed by ethnographers concerned the effects of elevating "transparency" to a desired objective or norm for ethnographic research, particularly over issues of confidentiality and the ethics of protecting our sources and interlocutors. But before discussing these issues, it bears mentioning that many of the ethnographers who participated in our discussion and shared their concerns with us felt that "data transparency" was not needed because no problem really exists. That is, if the impulse for data transparency is driven by concerns over falsified data or hidden data sets that enable some nefarious "scholars" to publish bad research, ethnographic research has not faced any such crisis.

Moreover, ethnographers generally do not equate data verification with the ability of one scholar to scrutinize the field notes and interview transcripts of another scholar. If the concern is with data falsification, reviewing field notes is unlikely to provide a solution; a scholar could simply falsify notes or interview transcripts while sitting in their university office. If the concern is checking whether a scholar is "cherry picking" data to support a predetermined hypothesis, scrutiny of notes is similarly unlikely to provide an effective solution. Ethnographers encounter, absorb, and process more data than ever could appear in field notes. So, for instance, a tabulation of utterances for and against a given proposition in notes would be a poor measure of the veracity of a scholar's work. An ethnographer's interpretations of their data are couched in a broader web of data, typically including deep background knowledge of a field site's history, knowledge of the cultural context in which a specific utterance is made that provides the context for properly interpreting its meaning, and a raft of experiences that did not make it into field notes that inform the interpretation (what some scholars refer to as "headnotes" [Ottenberg 1990, 144–146]. Moreover, although there may not be other scholars working in a given ethnographers specific field site, there are often are. And even if there are not other scholars in the specific location, there may be scholars working in analogous locations in a given country. Such scholars can act as a very real check on the validity of a scholars' data. While scholars working in analogous areas may disagree (sometime vehemently) about the interpretation of data, such disagreements can also shed light on the underlying reliability of the data upon which they are arguing.

These are some of the practical issues connected to research openness and research validity. However, there are epistemological issues also. Specifically, the epistemology underpinning most ethnographic work is explicitly interpretive, so artifacts such as field notes and interview transcripts are not objective "data" in the sense understood by positivist epistemologies. Rather, they are better understood as pieces of a long process of sorting out what the ethnographer thinks her field interlocutors understand to be happening and how she interprets their understandings. Ethnography is a set of research practices getting at meaning, not objective facts, so the meaning of items recorded in field notes will evolve as the researcher gains a deeper understanding of the topic. Notes taken early in a project will take on different meaning or be superseded as the research progresses; indeed, notes convey far more about the researcher's evolving understanding of their subject than they do about the subject itself. In many instances, field notes make sense only to the person who wrote them, because they are explicitly written for that purpose. As one commenter to the discussion noted, sharing research notes can be valuable if the purpose is to understand how a particular project or ethnographer's thinking evolved over time. But they are less useful for outsiders to understand the subject of inquiry because they reflect not data but the researcher's thought processes and ideas. Moreover, field notes are not raw accounts of a set of events. They are products of an ethnographer's conscious and unconscious bias about what to observe, remember, and record (Sanjek 1990, 385–386). Thus, sharing of field notes or long excerpts from notes may be better evidence of these biases (potentially an important thing to know) than of the fieldwork that went into producing evidence-based claims.

Similar practical and epistemological concerns attach to replication as research transparency. Ethnographic work cannot be replicated; it is, by definition anchored in the particular time and place of the field research and thus even efforts to return to an earlier study will not result in replication (Sanjek 1990, 394). If a quantitative study fundamentally challenges findings of earlier studies, for example, then scholars will want to see that data to determine whether the data themselves are valid. But this analogy does not hold with ethnographic research, because challenging existing ethnographic work with new ethnographic work happens by bringing in a new piece of the story that was missing, and not by producing new results that disprove earlier results because the earlier results were themselves anchored in a different time and, therefore, a different context.

Limits to Data Access for Ethnographers

The ethical sharing of material is arguably shaped more by the research being conducted than the ethnographic method itself. For instance, when scholars engage in ethnographic work in situations of violence or among vulnerable or marginalized populations those situations limit the kinds of data that an ethnographer can share. As the ethnographer knows her research site and research subject best, along with the attendant risks for her subjects that would come with sharing research material, the ethnographer should determine what can or cannot be shared ethically, possibly in consultation with her research subjects as appropriate. These conditions necessarily limit what material can be shared and how it should be shared, with ultimate discretion being left up to the researcher.

With that said, common areas of concern emerge from discussions among ethnographers about "red lines" for sharing, suggesting there are practical, ethical, and safety challenges to transparency. Multiple participants in the QTD discussions voiced clear opposition to the idea that sharing fieldnotes was a useful exercise or that it would work to make ethnography more transparent (see also Cramer 2015).[10] We agree for epistemological, ethical reasons, and

[10] Samantha Majic, "Limits to Transparency," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, October 20, 2016; Kathy Cramer, "Limits to Transparency," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, October 20, 2016; Aili Tripp, "Publishing Fieldnotes," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, November 12, 2016; Lee Ann Fujii, "Publishing Fieldnotes," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, April 7, 2016; Amanda Fulmer, "Publishing Fieldnotes," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, November 20, 2016;

practical reasons.[11] First, as we discussed above, from an epistemological point of view, fieldnotes are highly contextual. They cannot be used by others as “data” in the way we used them ourselves in the research process. Sharing fieldnotes does not make replication possible, nor does it make our work transparent.

Second, from an ethical standpoint, sharing fieldnotes can have unintended consequences for subjects - unintended consequences that could be devastating. Because ethnographers come to know many of their interlocutors well, gaining access to their private lives, practices, and thoughts, the protection of their confidence is paramount. One participant in the QTD discussion invoked “the imperative of protecting people who have invited you into their confidence or their environment.” While this is particularly critical when we work in situations where any breach of confidence could lead to direct personal, physical harm, it is important in every research situation.

To this end, ethnographers note numerous potential issues that could create harms for either research subjects or researchers themselves should sharing field notes become a norm. One issue is that anonymization has limits. Subject or location identities can be revealed by details that may seem innocuous when recorded—for instance, the color of a house or the food at a restaurant. Such concerns are not merely hypothetical. Journalists and scholars were able to use such details to identify the specific research site and individual research subjects in Alice Goffman’s much-discussed ethnography of young men escaping the law, *On the Run*, despite the fact that Goffman had anonymized her subjects’ names and the name of the neighborhood in which she conducted her fieldwork (Campos 2015; Singal 2015). The more material that is shared, the greater the likelihood that identities may be revealed, which could create risks for research subjects. This raises concerns for researchers about sharing even anonymized field notes in many cases.

Third, a related practical concern is that the informed consent procedures which would be required should data sharing become a widespread practice may lead subjects not to participate. There are at least two issues. First, subjects may be uncomfortable with interview transcripts or field notes that record their words or actions being shared widely to individuals or organizations unknown to the subject. Ethnographic research is founded upon trust between a researcher and her subjects—trust that is difficult to extend beyond the personal relationships typically developed during ethnographic research. Relatedly, ethnographers bear an ethical responsibility for how their subjects are portrayed and can check with their subjects about the accuracy and manner of presentation before publication. With required data sharing to a repository or similar site, that responsibility would be difficult to maintain, as other researchers may take field notes as raw data that can be used for publication without the responsibility or ability to check with subjects about how the information is being used. A possible consequence is that subjects may be less likely to participate. If our interlocutors come not to trust us because we have shared our notes (or simply because we tell them we will have to do to so) we may find

[11] For partially contrasting views, see Pool (2017); Guest, "Publishing Fieldnotes," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, November 23, 2016; Jeffrey Paller, "Publishing Fieldnotes," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, November 28, 2016.

that we no longer have access to important people, key sites, and some research may never be possible in the first place.

The ultimate effect of data sharing, therefore, may be that there could be unintended consequences for subjects, which undermines the ability of researchers to faithfully appraise subjects of the risks they may face in participating in a project. Political or social circumstances can change radically such that what might appear as comparatively low-risk data today may become high-risk data tomorrow - for instance, if a country undergoes regime change. Researchers will not be able to anticipate these changes. As a result, for even seemingly low-risk projects, ethnographers caution that modesty in sharing data is often the best practice rather than open sharing given potentially future increases in risk for research subjects.

Yet, unintended consequences of data sharing do not only extend to individuals who have consented to participate in a project; they may extend to those uninvolved in a research project. Scholars point to a case from Boston College in which historians took oral histories about violence in Northern Ireland. Although the researchers promised the transcripts would not be made available until after participants had passed away, British authorities subpoenaed the tapes and arrested individuals for alleged crimes mentioned on the tapes, even though those individuals had not participated in the Boston College project. In other words, the project unintentionally created risks for individuals who had not participated in the project and, therefore, had not consented to the risks involved in participation. Scholars are concerned that such risks may emerge should sharing ethnographic data become a standard practice in the discipline.

Unintended consequences of data sharing can also accrue for researchers themselves. The case of Giulio Regeni, an Oxford PhD student who was murdered - some suspect by Egyptian security forces - while conducting fieldwork on labor unions in 2016, looms large over ethnographic research. It shows, in particular, the risks that researchers themselves take on in pursuing their work and how those risks are not necessarily apparent during its conduct. The potential risks, ethnographers are concerned, would be increased should widespread data sharing become the norm given that revealing too much might alert authorities to the methods a researcher used, places a research was, or security measures a researcher took.[12] With that information, authorities might be able to keep researchers from returning to a field site - or worse.

Such unintended consequences for researchers, ethnographers worry, might ultimately have consequences for the discipline with ethnographers potentially avoiding topics that might put them or their subjects at risk should sharing field notes or interview transcripts become the expected practice. Relatedly, ethnographers worry that different data sharing requirements at different journals may lead ethnographers to publish only in certain journals where they can protect their data, with the effect that it segregates ethnographic research to only certain venues. In other words, there may be negative consequences for knowledge production as

[12] Sarah Parkinson, "Limits to Transparency," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, December 2, 2016.

researchers become uncomfortable with pursuing risky topics should widespread data sharing become the default practice.

Recommendations for the Peer-Review and Publishing Process

Specified procedures for what transparency is or should look like for ethnographers would require that we adopt particular meanings for what transparency is. We recognize that transparency has multiple meanings depending on the researcher, the question, the methods, and the methodological commitments. We hope, however, that the discussion above offers some insight into how ethnographers are open and clear about their research practices. The discussion is meant to both encourage reflection among ethnographers and offer some insights to journal and book series editors who want to publish ethnographic work. To allow ethnographers to engage in many of the practices we discuss, editors will need to accommodate the differentiated needs that will likely arise in reviewing and publishing ethnographic work. To that end, we do have specific guidelines for journal editors reviewing ethnographic research and for authors preparing their work for peer review. First, we suggest that journal editors seek out two categories of reviewers (1) those who are skilled ethnographers themselves and (2) those who know the field site(s) that inform the research. This is, of course, in addition to reviewers who know the theoretical literature to which the research speaks. Second, we suggest that editors let ethnographers explain how transparency worked in their particular study. This requires that ethnographers take the time (often difficult in a 10,000 word journal submission, so appendices may be necessary) to be explicit, open, and candid about everything from research design, to interactions in the field, to analytical processes, depending on what is relevant for the particular piece of research.[13] Even then, it may be appropriate for some scholars to not be forced to report all research activities in a single article or appendix (if that is even possible). Rather, articles and books might be best considered not as "100% self contained" and instead have methodological issues, challenges, or insights elaborated over a series of separate publications.[14]

We encourage ethnographers to continue to be open and explicit in the work they do and hope that this document offers some suggestions not only for ethnographers but also for scholars seeking to better understand what some of the meanings of transparency might be for those who practice the method.

[13] For a description and an example of how ethnographic data has been reported in a journal context, see Diana Fu, "Reporting Ethnographic Data in Journals," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, November 14, 2016.
[14] Sarah Parkinson, "Practicalities of Transparency," Discussion forum III.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, December 2, 2016. For examples, see the relationship between Lee Ann Fujii's book (2009, 2010, 2012) on the Rwandan genocide and subsequent publications on interview methods and research ethics.

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