

Making Silence Matter: The Place of the Absences in Ethnography

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Professional and organizational attention in recent years to what ethnographers can and cannot disclose as part of their research accounts has extended the range and relevance of concerns pertaining to the relation between investigators and those they study. When researchers are working under conditions characterised by secrecy and a limited access to information, then the difficulties faced in offering accounts are all the more acute. This presentation examines the political, ethical, and epistemological challenges associated with how we manage what is missing within our writing. The argument is based on an ethnographic-type engagement over a five-year period. I want to consider the representational implications of the disclosure rules, confidentiality agreements, informal arrangements, etc. associated with contemporary research; in particular their implications for how knowledge claims are substantiated and reproduced. I also want to go further though to ask what novel writing strategies and methods could enable us to undertake a critical and evocative engagement with the worlds we study, while also respecting the limitations on what can be communicated. My basic orientation has been to seek forms of writing that exemplify the negotiation of disclosure and concealment between investigators and those they study in the relation between authors and their readers. In doing so, a goal has been to determine how limits to what can be said could figure as a productive part of our research accounts.

INTRODUCTION

Within qualitative traditions, recurring questions have been posed about the status of research accounts. Secrecy - as so often experienced as part of organisational life - raises at least two sets of concerns in this regard: whether we as researchers can gain an adequate appreciation of the situations under study and to what extent we can (and should) discuss them in light of the disclosure rules, confidentiality agreements, and other such provisions in place.

An aim of this background paper to the conference is to ask how the highlighting of secrets and absences could be part of efforts to do justice to our understanding of the social world. This is done by shifting away from only treating limits on what can be stated as barriers to representation. Instead, I want to ask how limits and silences could be incorporated within our writing in order to convey experience. Much of the argument amounts to a meta-analysis of the book *Experimental Secrets* (Rappert, 2009) that detailed the author's engagement in diplomatic and security communities.

CONVEYING, IGNORANCE, AND SECRECY

Secrecy, understood as the deliberate concealment of information, is pervasive across social, commercial, and public life. The family, personal relations, and private enterprises are just some of the sites where the dynamics of concealment are highly pertinent. Although secrecy is often portrayed as the antithesis of transparency, it can have implications far beyond restricting who gets access to what. The manner in which secrets are kept can shape identities and organizational relations (e.g., Gusterson, 1996; Masco, 2002; Rappert and Balmer, 2007). Secrets are actively maintained in ways that define relationships and identities (e.g., Masco 2002; Gusterson, 1996).

With reference to such expansive conceptualizations, secrets have been defined according to the content of the information concealed, the consequences of its disclosure, and the methods by which information is told (Bellman 1981). Taussig (2003) and De Jong (2007) are among those who have underscored the importance of orientating to secrecy as a social practice, where its relevance for interaction derives from what is done through acts of *telling*.

The importance of attending to the ‘productive’ aspects of secrecy is underscored by the (re-)emerging academic attention to ignorance. Traditionally, the social sciences have taken knowledge as their topic - how claims about the world are produced, secured, shared, contested, entrenched, etc. Less commonplace have been attempts that start with how individuals and organizations seek ignorance. Yet recent studies have sought to elaborate the usefulness of claims to ignorance (Stocking and Holstein 1993; Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). For instance, it can be embraced - if not outright deliberately manufactured through the strategic concealment of information - as a way of diverting, deflecting, or denying culpability (McGoey, 2007).

Concerns about the pervasiveness and performativity of secrets are not just matters of *study* for researchers, but also *relevant* to the production of analysis. Maintaining the confidentiality or anonymity of those being researched or those work is undertaken for is just one of the ways our accounts entail acts of deliberate concealment. The ethical dimensions of what is left in and left out of research accounts vis-à-vis those studied have been subject to much commentary (e.g., Lee 1993; Murphy and Dingwall 2007). More widely, there are reasons to maintain that how we as ethnographers tell secrets will become an even more prevalent topic of concern over time. First, government and national funding streams in many countries in Europe and elsewhere are prioritizing social research with high social ‘impact’ and ‘relevance’ (e.g., Oreszczyn and Carr, 2008). As part of this, investigators are being encouraged to enter into collaborations with so called ‘users’ about the design and goals of research. While such a movement poses many opportunities, it also heightens certain concerns about what can be shared and to who that are commonplace in the context of ethnography praxis in the industry. Not least among these in relation to this presentation are the dilemmas of what to reveal of our research experiences while being immersed in dense and shifting sets of rule-based and informal relations (Baez, 2002). Second, the increasingly widespread adoption of institutional research ethics evaluation and monitoring in industry and academia heightens attention to and establishes a bureaucratic mechanism for establishing what can and can not be disclosed (Conn, 2008; Wiles et al., 2006).

Unfortunately though, the conventional orientations of social studies typically relegate to a neat footnote (if that) a consideration of the representational and epistemological implications of what they leave out (see Nespor, 1990). While concerns about the ethical relations to those studied are a matter of extensive commentary (see Jones et al., 2006; see Baez 2002; Ellis 2007), the literature is much less well developed outside of concerns that might be labelled under ‘research ethics’. More generally, there are reasons for maintaining researchers should pay more attention to the implications of what is left out of their accounts. For instance, while recent studies of ignorance have posed probing questions about the importance of absences, ambiguities, and unknowns in public affairs, these have been directed at identifying and unmasking the uses of ignorance by those under study: for instance, tobacco companies, global warming skeptics, and government regulatory bodies. Far less attention has

some from others. When one party claims possession of knowledge that can not be shared with others, then this declaration figures as a ready-made block to possible counter arguments.

The lower extract of a redacted sentence of a Freedom of Information response indicates the deliberate efforts undertaken to withhold government information from outsiders. Especially in the areas of security and international relations, open government has its limits and can be seen to have its limits (see Gusterson, 1996). These restrictions mean that those outside of a select few that wish to take the measure of how officials assess security threats will struggle to do so. More widely than these examples, international diplomacy is often portrayed as an endeavor of somewhat doubtful candor wherein many things are left unsaid or encrypted.²

Secrecy though is not just a feature of these communities but it must be practiced in reporting about them because of disclosure rules. One of the most famous is called the ‘Chatham House Rule’. The 2002 updated version of it reads as follows:

When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.³

The rule enables those attending meetings, seminars, and workshops to repeat information heard. Yet, just what amounts to revealing identity is not clear from the rule itself. Would it be a violation of the rule to say the quote above on the left was given by an American? Presumably not, but what else could be stated might well be disputed. Yet despite this indeterminacy and the pervasiveness of this and other vague disclosure rules, I have almost no experience of uncertainties being raised about the meaning or scope of the Chatham House Rule.⁴ As another major source of concern, it is my experience that in attending ten events where this rule is stated, you are likely to hear ten different renditions of it.

Furthermore, within oral communications, I have experience of hearing attributed information from a Chatham House bounded meeting shared between participants to that meeting and non-participations. Yet, within written communication, in all my reading in the area of arms control-related literature, I can not recall a single attribution of a statement to a Chatham House Rule bounded meeting. While the rule is indeterminate, the practice is both permissive (in talk) and conservative (in writing).

With such conditions of negotiated disclosure, choices made about writing strategy take on some significance. The points in the previous paragraphs speak to the manner in which the practice doing ‘the ethnography of secrecy’ that will be discussed in this paper requires delving into complex relations of concealing and revealing. In seeking to make explicit the communication practices operating within

² See, for instance, Ritter (2005) and Barnes (1994).

³ <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/index.php?id=2>

⁴ At least where I did not initiate the grounds for doubt.

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communities, this paper will outline strategies for ‘writing back’ to our organizational and professional audiences – the kind of strategies that might be especially relevant for those ethnographers working within industry context who often write for internal purposes.

With the goal of epitomizing the dynamics between those in the communities under study in the relation between author and reader, in the remainder of this section I want to ask how it is possible to productively topicalize the limits of what is included in social research accounts. As will be clear, the kind of practice for writing sought is one that using the revelation of concealment to suggest the complexities of concealing and revealing prevalent in the communities in question.

WRITING SECRETS AND WRITING SELF

One mundane way that can be done is by actively highlighting what is left out of our stories through employing the blackening out of details often employed by government agencies. In this regard, Ellis (2007: 24) advised thinking ‘about ethical considerations before writing, but not to censure anything in the first draft to get the story as nuanced and truthful as possible.’ Yet, rather than then censoring through subsequent deletions difficult to detect by readers, another possibility is to write as we would like and then blacken out what is judged as impermissible. At the level of a face reading, this would have the advantage of making visible (at least some of) the erasures that take place in our reconstructions.

Yet, as suggested above, much latitude can exist in what to leave out of descriptions owing to vague disclosure rules. More generally though, it can be argued that disclosure rules and professional codes of conduct can not exhaustively speak to all eventualities. Testing the boundaries of how far the revelation of others’ identity can be taken could ride roughshod with confidences placed in us as professionals. Yet there is one person a researcher-author can experiment with regarding what counts as identification: himself or herself. Writing accounts of events with varyingly suggestive identifications of the author in the situations under study - through the use of redacted text and withholding of certain details - provides one way of foregrounding the contingencies of disclosure rules.

Consider these points and others in relation to the exchange below, recounted from international meeting regarding the nexus between advanced science and new weaponry:

‘How did you get rid of the threat of bioterrorism?’
 ‘I don’t know?’
 ‘Stop talking about it.’
 ‘But that would put you out of a job, wouldn’t it [REDACTED]?’

The blackening out in this case hides the name of the individual made the butt of the joke. Appearing on its own without any suggestion of who is party to the exchange, this form of telling represents one way of responding to the uncertainty about what is allowed by disclosure agreements. It is a matter of speculation for the reader whether the author is the joke teller, the responder, a listener, or the object of ridicule. Yet, such a cautious orientation is arguably not necessary. Whether,

for instance, the official version of the Chatham House Rule allows individuals to identify their own talk seems disputable. Under a strict reading of the official version, the answer would appear to be 'no' because this would entail identifying a participant to a meeting. Without this identification, though, it would never be possible to repeat what one directly heard. In response to such uncertainty, an approach I have adopted is to offer varying suggestive identifications of myself.

Adopting such a playful orientation can not only be used to flag the contingencies of what is included in research accounts, but also the implications of telling secrets. Both within social interactions as well as in the relation between researchers and their readers, the revealing of otherwise hidden information has implications for how the teller is understood. Like confessions, in general, revelations invite the reader into a moral relation with the teller, one centered on sharing what is off limits to others (see Rodriguez and Ryave, 1992). The indication of access to what is typically off limits provides a basis for setting apart the secret teller (see Gunn, 2005). At least some (albeit engineered) hesitation could minimize the most problematic hazards associated with the suggestion we as researchers are 'storying our secrets into the light' (Poulos, 2008: 53).

Especially when we position ourselves as co-participants in events rather than as mere observers of them, then a playful orientation to author identity in our write-ups can help acknowledge the varying interpretations given of us in our fieldwork interactions. Speaking about highly participatory forms of research, Greenwood (2002: 118) commented that 'there will be times when it can be difficult for the [researcher] and his/her collaborators to have the necessary awareness of the different roles and their implications at a given time in a project. This is due to the inherent complexity [of such roles,] where the researcher should, and shall, move between closeness and distance, participator and spectator, learner and teacher.' The messiness of our place as investigators means that we often do not have anything like a rounded grasp of how we are seen by others. With this basic difficulty come questions about how we present ourselves and others in our writing. If autoethnography is to go beyond the goal of communicating situated actions, but instead to also critique ourselves as situated actors (as recommended in Spry, 2001), then it is necessary to explore ways of acknowledging and working with our uncertain and negotiated status.

WRITING SECRETS AND WRITING THE WORLD

Disclosure limits have more than ethical dimensions, but also *representational* ones. For instance, as Walford (2002) argued that questionable generalizations that prove resistant to challenge can be advanced under the banner of protecting actors' identities. Nespor (2002: 550) likewise spoke to this point in contending that:

Giving people or places pseudonyms and strategically deleting identifying information turns them into usable examples or illustrations of generalizing theoretical categories...in which form they stand in for social classes, ethnic groups, genders, institutions, or other theoretical constructs.

In this way, the findings of research are constituted as 'movable, replicable, and citable'. As such, they can then be added to the general knowledge in the social sciences.

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After recognizing the potential for what is left out to bolster what is taken as in them, an issue is where to go from there. For instance, in relation to concerns about the link between anonymization and the formation of questionable generalizations, Walford (2002), recommended choosing research sites because of their uniqueness rather than their supposed generalizability.

A different way forward in line with the drive of this article is to topicalize the missing. For instance, when it is not clear what can be reported from a meeting because of the vague and indeterminate disclosure arrangements in place, one technique is to offer upshot glosses of the understood implications and import of the event. If we as researchers 'can not' give detailed descriptions, it is possible to advance our evaluations of the significance of events. Another technique is to systematically detail what preceded and followed an event, but to noticeably delete it from our accounts. Both techniques draw attention to the missing elements of our stories.

As a somewhat narrow purpose, telling stories in such ways parallels the interactional dynamics at play in secrecy laden communities. Herein, researchers often hear upshot glosses and must piece together what happened at certain events that could not be attended.

As a wider purpose, techniques highlighting what is absent from our accounts can speak to the manner in which readers of text are generally making connections, drawing inferences, and speculating in relation to what is missing. Writing as a reduction of experience to words requires active participation by the reader. As Iser (2002: 293) argued, in reading a text the reader is 'drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning.' The overt blanking of material from social analysis can help promote active and aware attention to the reconstruction of events. In doing so, with the strategic use of the missing comes the possibility of encouraging consideration by readers about what constitutes appropriate action in social research and social life (see Barone 1990).

It is not just possible to bring to the fore the manner researchers and readers must work to piece together meaning from inevitably partial accounts, but to question how this gets done. For instance, in relation to the matters of security in this article, government Freedom of Information provisions at least offer the possibility of challenging the claims of actors as well as allowing researchers to report on events that would otherwise be off limits. Introducing materials gathered from requests after the initial portrayal of the events in question provides one way to reconsider how events are initially interpreted by readers. With the often glaring redactions from official accounts and their usually obscure text, the bounds on the information received as part of such requests can set the basis for a further consideration of what is being revealed and concealed through Freedom of Information 'disclosures'.

WRITING SECRETS AND WRITING INTERACTIONS

As another dimension of handling absences, social researchers partaking in worlds infused with secrecy need to consider its implications for social interaction. As has been argued elsewhere, the deliberate concealment of information should not simply be understood as a barrier to interactions, but

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consequential within them (Rappert 2007). As Masco (2001, 451) argued in a study of US national defence labs, secrecy is:

wildly productive: it creates not only hierarchies of power and repression, but also unpredictable social effects, including new kinds of desire, fantasy, paranoia, and - above all - gossip.

And certainly during the events that the author has participated in, rumour and gossip have abounded as individuals try to take the measure of what has happened and speculate on what is to come in settings characterized by shifting front and back regions. In the informal banter, much conjecture has been evident about what entities such as ‘George Bush’, ‘Iran’, or ‘the security community’ really think as well as the underlying motivations for statements and actions.

Informal side discussions - whether at the level of speculative rumour or seemingly more informed assessment - serve what is routinely acknowledged as an important facet of the sorts of meetings I attended. Indeed, providing time for face-to-face dialogue is often a central justification for organizing many events. Yet, I can not recall a single publication by an arms control or security studies analyst where statements have been attributed to such conversational settings. In my experience, rule indeterminacy about exactly what can be recounted is associated with conservatism in writing. I do have recollections though of statements from disclosure agreement bounded events being repeated as part of oral conversations at subsequent events.

So, how might it be possible to give a sense of participating in ‘secret talk’ while also respecting the (albeit vague) disclosure arrangements in place?

One way is to present snippets of conversational exchanges taken from a meeting but without any supplementary information about the speakers (for examples of this see the ‘On the Circuit’ chapters in Rappert [2009]). Yet this might not be deemed to go far enough. If those statements related to themes brought up by a particular speaker at a meeting, then others present to the meeting as a whole (but not the side conversation) might be able identify the speaker. A way to remove the prospects of such secondary identification would be to jumble together statements taken from different events. A short rendition of these mixed snippets is as follows:

‘We all know why
we are in the
situation we are in.’

‘I am just saying that what people say in closed sessions is not what they say in the open one. No state said anything about fear of science being shut down in the closed sessions. Did you notice it was not in the final report?’

‘How on Earth did you get the idea that we did the IL-4

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experiment on monkeypox?’

‘Some who would be in a position to know told me.’

‘Who?’

‘Well I can not say. I remember it quite clearly, as he was reaching for a croissant.’

‘So the foxes are in charge of the coup now?’

‘Haven’t they always been.’

‘I am not like most scientists, I don’t close my eyes to what happens in this country. Like my parents that didn’t want to ask questions before the war. Nice people, but they avoided asking questions when their neighbors disappeared. I don’t want to be like that, I want to ask questions.’

‘We joked about it as one code to rule them all.’

‘All of this talk about bioterrorism, it’s all about fear.’

The result of such contortions and precautions is a stilted jumble that hides as it discloses; an assortment of text that is at once expectant with and bereft of meaning. Any number of associations might be made between a single statement and others or between statements and individuals. And yet, any such attributions would have a dubious validity. Motivations, patterns and origins might well be attributed in a manner that reinforces existing beliefs.

Such a representational form though would have advantages of suggesting to a reader what it can be like operating in security and diplomatic settings. For instance, the extremes of truncation and abstraction speak to the hesitations that can be associated with attempts to understand situated talk. Fleeting conversations between diverse individuals discussing complex issues through employing varied professional vocabularies infused by acts of concealment often require inferential leaps. They are often liable to foster poorly justified conclusions too.

It is possible to move beyond simply noting the manner in which the desire to keep hidden affects what can be reported. One way of doing this is to consider how researchers as actors orientate to and write about uncertainties and unknowns. Especially when researchers acknowledge themselves as active participants in the situations depicted, rather than notionally being mere observers of them, then we must make decisions about how to act and represent our action. Action though is always undertaken in conditions of ‘bounded rationality’ (as in Simon, 1982), wherein we are limited in what we know and our capacity to deal with this information.

Certainly working in an emerging security policy area through a disciplinary set of preoccupations, the limits on understanding are many. Knowing how to go on in such settings as a researcher can be rather challenging. For me, where the international deliberation about codes of conduct was headed and what it amounted to were the topics I was trying to figure out in the past and ones I am still wrestling with today. Attempting to gauge the commitments to and intentions behind others' actions were matters of some difficulty, especially given the circumspectness of many interactions.

As a result, it would be rather problematic to give a story that did not accord central place to the importance of the missing from researchers' accounts. As part of this, what is needed is not only to note various 'blind spots' associated with our understanding from one point in time. This would hazard providing a flat account that abstracts utterances and actions from the contexts that make them meaningful and the contexts that they make meaningful (Wieder, 1974). Instead, what is needed is an account that asks how the missing figures in the sequential unfolding of our understanding of events.

In doing this, it is possible to disturb the sense of meaning making between patterns and instances over time. So, as explicated through ethnomethodology, meaning is often accorded to actions or statements by seeing them as expressions of a pattern; such as a pattern of motivations or identity. Yet, this pattern is itself formed from the instances (Garfinkel, 1994). In other words, a sense of pattern is both constituted by and constituting of the individual instances. Yet for me, this mutual constitution still remains unsettled and poorly formed in important respects. In no small part, this is due to the information restrictions in play within security and diplomatic communities. These restrictions make relevant distinctions between front and back region impression management, raise doubts about the candor of talk, and underscore the role of trust in social interactions.

The limitations of identification of individuals in our writing might be quite productive. So, if an account contains various expressions, but not information about who said them, readers might be perceiving patterns, but not be sure if they were justified patterns or exactly what they were patterns of. Contradictory statements being made that appeared related in some indefinite way to a group or setting would likewise raise questions of interpretation.

This (selective) problematizing of meaning making then can speak to the doubts that can be associated with social analysts' - and others' - attempts to understand what is going on in settings infused with secrecy. What is being suggested here then is to have readers to struggle to figure out the 'big picture' because this was and is my experience. The gaps crafted are meant to speak to the gaps in my understanding of what is going on and my place in it.

DISCUSSION

By considering the complexity of disclosure associated with undertaking research in security settings where secrets are rife, this paper has sought to set out a novel approach to writing up the ethnography of secrecy. That is through adopting writing strategies that entail concealment as a means for revelation - albeit a certain exemplary kind of revelation.

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In acknowledging how the fashioned revelation and concealment is a feature of our accounts (rather than just being a dynamic of the settings under study), I have wished to avoid treating the telling of secrets in qualitative studies as straightforward and innocent. As well, instead of deeming secrets to be unfortunate absences or obligatory precautions, I have wished to ask how they could be appropriated in a practice of telling (as in Bratich, 2007). One of the things sought through the engagement with secrecy here was to demystify the allure that so often accompanies its discussion. Rather than the mere exposure of hidden information, we sought to place on the table for consideration the pervasive aspects of secret keeping - this even in the analysis of secret keeping.

More though, rather than just acknowledging how it entailed secret keeping, this chapter has sought to turn incompleteness into an analytical resource. With its play of revelation and concealment, the conversational writing format is meant to epitomize the negotiation of revelation and concealment prevalent in international diplomacy. An experimental form of writing has been taken to convey an experiential appreciation 'what it was like' to undertake inquiry in conditions of partial disclosure (see Sparkes, 2000). That has meant highlighting the tensions, uncertainties, and contradictions associated with knowing and conveying matters that cannot be wholly known or conveyed.

An underlying premise of this presentation has been that in examining issues where question marks exist about candour and openness, an account that does show this should beg questions about how it was seamed together. An analysis that smoothes out such roughness denies the conditions under which it takes place and presumably many of the reasons why it takes place. Attending to place of what is absent is one way to try to convey 'feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences, and [to] find a textual place for ourselves, our doubts and our uncertainties' (Richardson, 2000: 11). Considering the parallels and interconnections between the place of secrecy and absences in our research narratives and those we observe in the communities we study is one way for researchers-as-authors to try to 'hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied' (ibid.: 15). More though, it can be part of trying to understand how accountability is accomplished as a practical activity by those people. In contrast, the lack of attention to how exposures are carried out and their implications for accounts could lead to the establishment of new forms of unacknowledged conventions.

Yet the sorts of visible and engineered absences proposed above pose concerns about manipulation similar to those associated with the partial revelations of any other story. In purporting to attend to what is missing, while necessarily only being able to do so in a limited fashion, the types of writing techniques suggested in this article could be associated with significant dangers about their selectivity. Indeed, the writing about those writing strategies is itself questionable in relation to concerns about manipulation. In providing only certain (limited) details and elaborations, this article could be questioned in relation to how it raises parallel types of concerns about how the missing figured into the arguments. In other words, in its use of absences, this article exemplifies aspects of the writing strategies advocated for addressing absences. As a result, the scope for concern for how absences figure in social analysis is considerable.

It has not been my intention to offer an escape from the many problems associated with conveying experience. Rather the intent has been to think about ways of writing that sensitize us as researchers to how secrets figure within social relations, that speak to our lived experiences in situations of managed disclosure, and that alert us as to how secrets help secure our claims to knowledge. In acknowledgement of the demands of secrecy, this presentation has asked how investigators can fashion alternative possibilities for knowing.

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