

## A WORD ON TRUSTWORTHINESS, ETHICS, AND POLITICS

### Trustworthiness

Trust came up in this study on several fronts:

- Can my participants (interview storytellers, people-I'm-observing) trust me and feel safe around me? What makes that so?
- Can I trust my participants and feel safe around them? What makes that so?
- Can I be trusted as a researcher to gather “good” data and tell a “reliable” story to you, the reader/audience?

I addressed the first (participants trusting me) by laying as many of my cards as possible on the table: what study I'm doing and why, motivations, what would happen with their data, etc – and continuing to do so throughout the process, plus asking them how they felt about the process and being attentive to cues of discomfort (which didn't come up often). Since I was interviewing/observing other academics, my role as a graduate student helped: I'm “one of them.”

Similar things make me believe that my participants themselves were and are trustworthy in the sense that they would do their best to help my study, and not sabotage it deliberately. I went into the project believing they would be, and I think that came across (“she trusts us!”) and became a self-fulfilling prophecy, which was what I had hoped. In general, I encountered a great desire to help and a willingness to be reflexive with me on the fly.

In terms of whether you (the reader) can trust me – well, that's up to you. Is my data believable? I've left openings for you to verify my data by giving details of many of my participants, whose contact information can be found online. I've tried to be forthright about my biases and background (although I'm sure I've forgotten things – but I try to say that too!) and try to point directly to data as evidence to back up claims I make. However, many of my claims are suppositions at this point, because I have so little data; many of them are large leaps that go far from the original wording of the interview transcript... I offer you these writings as my own view and my current best-guesses, but it's your call what you think and believe of them.

## **Ethics**

In working on a research project involving radical transparency, I had to weigh the ethics of “first, do no harm” against the mandate given to historians and journalists to find the truth. The two often don't conflict, but when they do, is it my duty as a researcher to “protect” my subjects if the telling or hearing of “truth” might harm them?

My answer: no. I side squarely with historians and journalists here; my subjects are adults who have or are pursuing advanced degrees and are fully aware of the possible consequences of their speech and actions. It is my ethical obligation to inform them fully of the parameters of my research (what I'll be talking with them about, what will happen to the data, who'll be able to see it, that they can stop at any time, etc) and the possible risks I can think of to them, but then it is *their* responsibility to “protect themselves” and *my* responsibility to facilitate pursuit of whatever truth we can pursue together. This includes ongoing truthfulness to participants if things come up or either of us thinks of a potential consequence along the way, or if something seems to pose a danger to them (in the case of my study, “danger” is likely to be professional instead of physical).

There are no easy answers. I know I'm stepping into unknown territory, but as long as my subjects know that and are willing to come along with me, and we all try to do the right things by each other (and to discuss our evolving definitions of the “right thing” as situations come up), we'll be okay.

## **Politics**

Politics came up most often here in the form of bureaucracy needed to access transcription services. Contracts for CART services (Communication Access Realtime Transcription, the verbatim service I highly prefer for radical transparency research) are usually administered through a University's Disability Resources Center (DRC), but Indiana adds another level of red tape by requiring all DRCs to contract with providers through a state agency, even if the funding came from my advisor's research budget via our department's finance office (yet another round of paperwork for me). The

individual transcriptionists (I've built personal relationships with several), the DRC, and my advisor had gotten used to my strange requests (“I have an international research conference call.” “I’ll be a department seminar speaker and need to understand audience Q&A.” “I’m going to Ohio.”) I can't say the same for the state agency. At every level (advisor, department financial office, DRC, state agency, transcriptionists) I needed to describe my project repeatedly, ensure the paperwork I was given to fill out was correct (it often wasn't; they frequently assumed I was asking for assistive services for class meetings, and were confused that I was using CART as a research tool) nudge people to get forms through... all part of a day's work.

I was surprised that institutional politics weren't a barrier to getting great stories from my subjects. I'd expected them to be wary of the transparent nature of the data-sharing and the potential for full disclosure of their names (T was an exception), concerned about promotion/tenure/what-will-others-in-my-dept-think, reluctant to speak ill of colleagues, and so forth, but they simply nodded at the information and talked with me as they would have spoken in a hallway within earshot of passers-by. As long as storytellers know the parameters of who'll be hearing their story, it's easy for them to adjust (as they would for a live audience) – even when I brought up “but institutional politics?” explicitly to them out of concern that the faculty/grad-students might have forgotten it, the usual response was “eh, so-and-so knows I speak my mind and I've already told them XYZ anyway.” I am also guessing that my positionality as a graduate student helped; I imagine lines of thinking along the lines of “you're one of us; you understand our context or are on your way to doing so, and it is part of my role to help you see this world more clearly via stories of my experiences and my advice.” In other words, my participation in the same politics helped me get around them.