Author's Commentary on "To Tell or Not to Tell"

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In this case study, the central issue revolves around Kenneth's role as a researcher. First, how does this role affect what people at the site can expect from him in terms of confidentiality? Second, how does this role affect how he responds to overhearing information that may change the course of the impeding union vote? And how will it affect his research goals?

In terms of Kenneth's role in his research site, does he have an obligation to act on behalf of the workers whose union votes may be tampered with? Or does he have an even stronger obligation to avoid disrupting or changing the situation at his research site? Should Kenneth act as an "objective" researcher, avoiding involvement in the situation, or should he be an advocate for his participants? This is an age-old question in the social sciences and one without a completely satisfactory answer.

Proponents of traditionalist, positivist social science would probably argue that intervening in this developing situation would somehow contaminate Kenneth's data, or keep the researcher from accessing the "Truth" — the one and only "objective" reality of the research site, which should unfold without his interference. This may be true in the sense that getting involved may block Kenneth's ability to conduct further observations at this company. But growing numbers of social scientists realize that not only does the researcher's very presence at the site affect his or her data, but that there are many "truths", and not one objective reality. Feminist researchers in particular have argued that the position of the researcher (his or her gender, race, social class, and other characteristics) as well as that of the participants, will influence the questions the researcher asks as well as the answers he or she finds (Deutsch 2004). So there are many truths in each research site. Since all researchers carry their own backgrounds and biases, truly "objective" social science is not a realistic goal and never has been. Researchers need only to

be honest with their audience about their own positionality, and, in some circumstances, should become involved in their research sites, especially when they have knowledge that may help their participants. The goal is to retain validity while being honest in a way that traditional positivist research has often not been. Although this latter perspective has gained much legitimacy within sociology, there is still some disagreement within the discipline along the fault lines between qualitative and quantitative researchers, and even among qualitative researchers (Taylor 1999).

At the same time, in this situation, there are other circumstances to consider. Will going public with the information he has overheard compromise the physical safety of the researcher? Will it involve him in a legal battle if plans to tamper with the union vote are uncovered? Not only does the researcher face the epistemological questions of his discipline, but the additional issues faced by whistleblowers everywhere. Further complicating matters is the fact that he did not hear specifically what was being planned, only that one or more drivers, aided by management, are planning to do something to challenge the rightful outcome of the vote.

In this case, it seems that his responsibilities are conflicting. The terms of confidentiality he offered to workers at the site would seem to cover the information that he overheard. On the other hand, he seems to have an ethical responsibility to the other workers at the site that may be harmed by those who would tamper with the vote. Perhaps he could mediate this conflict by reporting the information he overheard, but not providing names. This would protect confidentiality while keeping union officials on heightened alert for vote fraud.

References

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