Editing LAF: Educate, Don’t Defend!

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I first encountered Lee Ann Fujii at a 2006 APSA panel on ethnographic research. Seated on the dais and listening to Timothy Pachirat present his slaughterhouse fieldwork, I noticed a woman opposite me in the front row, doubled over so she couldn’t see him, shaking her head back and forth at the gory details. That was Lee Ann. I found her reaction highly ironic in retrospect, hearing about her own fieldwork with human perpetrators and victims of violence. Introduced at the panel’s end, we adjourned to the market hall across the street, with Peri Schwartz-Shea. It was the first of many conversations with the person I, like others, came to refer to as LAF, her email signature. It was also the beginning of an intellectual engagement that entwined the three of us for over a decade, largely, though not exclusively, around methodological and ethical issues. Over time, LAF’s and my encounters broadened beyond academic activities. We shopped together; hosted each other in DC and Amsterdam; commiserated when our cats died; and planned a trip to Sarajevo, where she wanted to show me the synagogue and other favorite places.

In engaging reviewers of her early, fieldwork-centered, interpretive work, now broadly admired in political science, LAF often struggled with how to respond. That was the focus of our initial interactions. Like many of us, LAF initially wrote up her work as if its research rationale were self-evidently logical and discernible to any reader. In those years, at least one reviewer per round challenged that premise, questioning the rigor, the validity, the generalizability, the sample size, etc., of her carefully crafted, empirically-supported analyses and theorizing. LAF allowed Peri and me to use an example from a typical exchange for teaching purposes in the 2007 Short Course “Writing (Up) Interpretive Research.” After lengthy consideration, I believe that her permission given then would extend to similar purposes here.

Interpretive methods were still not widely used—or understood—in US political science at that time. Misreading the manuscript’s interview-based field research as an ethnography, the editor called on LAF to develop the causal logic of the theoretical argument to the data, and clarify the research design. One reviewer asked for discussion of the potential selection bias arising from the sampling procedure. The other said that the interviews, however fascinating, valuable, and hard to collect, did not provide adequate, let alone systematic, evidence based on a research design and sound theorization. Faced with such assessments, a researcher—especially one just starting out—might decide to “tuck tail,” bite the bullet, and conform her non-realist/non-objectivist research to methodological expectations that do not fit what she had done. From our 2007 emails (redactions done for the Short Course):

Sent: Tue 9/18/2007 17:57
To: Dvora Yanow; Peregrine Schwartz-Shea
[hereafter DY/PSS]

…I know I should be excited about a very tentative R&R. …But the comments about “haphazard” data and lack of systematic evidence are where I run into problems b/c I did not do a survey of a large N random sample…. And people don’t like building theoretical arguments on what they are calling “ethnographic” data. I doubt that the reviewer is going to say, “oh, well, she interviewed 12 of that group” when to them 12 of anything cannot be the basis for any theoretical argument, particularly about something as complex as [event].

To understand the comments better, I would ask to read the manuscript. And then the conversation would begin:

From: DY
Date: Tuesday, September 18, 2007 2:26 pm
Cc: PSS

Hey, congratulations!!!

…Have you actually presented this as variables-based research?? If so, then ignore what I’m about to write. If not, you might consider pushing back a bit.

1 Among them, several APSA Short Courses, including the 2007 “Interpret This!” that she co-organized; the 2009 NSF Workshop on Interpretive Methods, where she joined the teaching staff; a 2014 workshop on institutional review boards; her 2018 interviewing book in the Routledge Series that Peri and I co-edit; and 12 years of Methods Cafés at the Western and APSA. Lee Ann was also active in the Interpretive Methodologies and Methods Conference Group: Executive Committee member since 2013; 2016 and 2017 Program Chair; and Chair of the Executive Committee from September 2017.
a. Variables: [A then-Ph.D. student doing ethnographic research] got this question on his first conference appearance… “It’s not clear to me what your dependent and independent variables are.”

b. “Selection biases from sampling procedure”: Did you really do sampling? If not, you might engage this as well—perhaps in terms of snowball or other exposure… [citations].

…IIf you’re not arguing that it’s a classic sample, you don’t have selection in the classic sense, which means you don’t have selection biases—but you do have something else entirely that you can discuss on its own terms. That is, purposive selection…; …you can discuss the purposes, the rationale for the selection, and…engage silent voices—and perhaps even reflect on silenced voices, by others and perhaps even by you.

…IIf you want to revise [o]n the reviewers’ terms, in order to get the work out, do so. But if you are troubled by their framing of the issues, try doing it your way, with full explanation in your letter [to the editor]. The more transparent you can be in the article about not just what you did, but why you did what you did...—perhaps think about leading the reviewer/s by the hand so they can try to get inside your head….

My thinking at the time was to encourage LAF to revise in keeping with her own presuppositions, rather than try to defend her choices on the methodological grounds more familiar to the reviewers. She replied:

Sent: Tue 9/18/2007 20:52
To: DY
Cc: PSS

…I don’t present my work as variables-based at all b/c it’s not. I do talk a bit about my methodology, to wit:

The data come from intensive interviews conducted in… I chose the two sites [reason]… I used a purposive sampling strategy [reason]… Across these different perspectives, I also tried to ensure a balance of men and women and a wide range of ages. The goal of the sampling strategy was….

Perhaps I need to get away from the language of sampling altogether…. It also makes me realize that people don’t know what purposive sampling is and what it’s for. Perhaps I need to say that I based the research design on [source] (which is true) and tried to get people who represented (oh, that’s a loaded term) a wide spectrum of [characteristics]. …I realize now that I do have to do a whole exegesis about how my methods *do* constitute rigor and systematicity….

…I like your advice…about doing it my way. After all, I can’t change how I collected the data, which they all seem to like for its richness—but it’s funny that richness never substitutes for what [is] deemed…‘real’ or ‘rigorous’ evidence/data. It leaves me defending not just my argument and analysis but my research design….

And it was “interesting,” she added, that journals known as outlets for “alternative approaches” would still judge interpretive research by non-interpretive standards.

But how to engage someone who does not speak your methods/methodological language? Peri had tackled this in opening her chapter on “standards” (Schwartz-Shea 2014/2006). What I suggested to LAF was a strategy based on assuming the reviewer and she didn’t share the same frame of reference, so she needed to educate more than to defend:

From: DY
Date: Tuesday, September 18, 2007 3:13 pm
Cc: PSS

...[W]e still need to be…‘bicultural’…—to speak both [our] own ‘home’ language and that of the dominant group.

...What you could do is elaborate on the ‘range’—why age, etc.? why not other demographic characteristics? i.e., why are some important, in this context, whereas others less so? what might you have missed through such focus?

...I’d love to see you take this on on its/your own terms, rather than try to defend your choices on quantitative grounds/terms. The heart of the matter is...—you are making ‘truth claims,’ and a reader wants to know (be able to evaluate) if those claims are trustworthy. Can you think like this reader and extract from your brain what your thinking was on this?

...I would say, try to educate, rather than defend (subtle shift). DO say you based on [citation], if that’s the case—her work is recognized, and part of the politics of science is signaling that you are building/standing/ relying on others’ work that has long been accepted as scientific….
What’s going on now, I think—why you have so many R&Rs—is that, having learned how to write a book (through the dissertation), you’re now learning how to write article-length mss., which are their own ‘art form.’

“Educate rather than defend”—that resonated with her.

Sent: Tue 9/18/2007 21:30
To: DY
Cc: PSS

…I soooo agree with what you say here and it gives me hope (strangely enough)—not to cede ground, to educate rather than defend…. I…didn’t realize I could also couch things in my response to the editor and not try to jam everything into the “revised” version…. I think I included age and gender just b/c of my own…training that samples need to be in some way “representative” of the population….

I also didn’t realize that articles are a separate art form—soo true….

A couple years later, Peri and I asked Lee Ann to write a book on interviewing for the Routledge Series on Interpretive Methods. The manuscript went through several revisions. As editors, we found the voice of the first two versions different from the one we knew, and loved, in the papers we had helped her revise. The third revision nailed it. A key moment in that shift partially captures our mutual learning throughout these processes:

I’m struck by how much I am learning about my own take on interviewing by reading your comments. …[W]e often do not realize how much our assumptions permeate our [research] designs. …So learning through doing is precisely what allows us to see the extent of those prior assumptions and the extent that they may have been wrong-headed. Indeed, unmasking prior assumptions that turn out to be “wrong” is not a by-product of relational interviewing—it is central to the process! (LAF email, March 2015)

The manuscript reveals another, very special trait. Lee Ann started her career with a full complement of realist-objectivist ideas, theories, methods standards/criteria. As she embraced a more interpretivist position—sparked largely, it occurs to me, by the mismatch between her field experiences and those ideas—she retained the “bicultural” ability to speak to both sides of a politicized methodological divide. Having learned to respond to reviewers’ challenges, she could translate between the two ways of thinking. Such translating was, after all, the font of her “lies” and “accidental ethnographer” papers, at least.

In one particular arena, however, LAF would not be edited: “race.” Its manifestations in The Netherlands became part of our conversations, especially each November–December when black-faced characters appeared in Dutch shop windows, which she knew from Belgium (think: Rwanda!). In August 2017 she e-introduced me to a colleague of hers in Amsterdam: “…I was telling him about your research on race in NL but I couldn’t do it justice. …[Y]ou both have similar critiques about the whole Black Pete bullshit….”

But I think she felt her adopted “educate, don’t defend” was inadequate for dealing with “race” in political science practices. In September, she wrote about her “other big project, which I’m now calling ‘White Supremacy in the Discipline.’ I’m no longer going to use the more socially palatable term ‘diversity’…” She had already sounded these themes in print (Fujii 2007, 540).

In November she emailed Ido Oren, Peri, and me:

I want to organize 2 theme-related roundtables [at APSA]…on white supremacy in the discipline. I am wedded to that language bc I am sick of framing the problem as “how do we recruit more PoCs” (which always gets bogged down in racist discussions about qualifications…). I see the real problem as…a system of privilege that actively sustains the status quo and benefits white scholars/faculty, even if they deny it.

She attached this draft abstract:

Why is Political Science so white? It has been six years since APSA released its “Report of the Task Force in the 21st Century,” which found increases in the number of women and scholars of color since 1980 “has been at a very slow pace, especially among faculty of color.” A more recent New York Times article showed that trends in enrollment in top schools is similarly bleak…. There can be no more pressing time to discuss this troubling state of affairs than the present political

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2 December-time Christian gift-giving takes place on the 5th, St. Nicholas Day. The white-bearded Sinterklaas arrives three weeks beforehand, accompanied by “Black Pete’s”—the Saint’s “helpers,” dreadlocked, thick-lipped, and in blackface, wearing Renaissance-era “Moorish” costumes and the slave’s gold hoop earring.
moment, when…white nationalists have been rallying to protect white privilege. Rather than view white supremacy and the pervasive problem of whiteness in the discipline as separate issues, these roundtables explore the extent to which the two are intertwined. Scholars from various subfields will focus not on the problem of how to recruit more “qualified” candidates of color, but rather on the problem of white privilege and white supremacy that works to maintain the status quo in the discipline.

The roundtables, “Democratic Implications of a Mostly White Discipline”—I: Recruitment and Hiring, II: Teaching and Research, took place on August 30, 2018. Sadly, she wasn’t there in body, though her spirit suffused the room.

I closed one of those 2007 emails with this: “Keep in mind: some yrs from now, insh’allah, you won’t have to be making these basic arguments, because your name will carry its own weight; and others will rely on your stuff to build their arguments.” What more she might have accomplished…. I miss her voice; and I miss her.

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References


