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EXPERIMENTAL SECRETS

International Security, Codes,
and the Future of Research

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Reflections

In Search of a Code

Are there limits to what should be known or communicated? What rules and standards ought to govern our efforts at coming to understand the world? If restrictions should be imposed on what is thinkable, sayable, or doable, then who should set them and how should they be enforced?

As attested in Roger Shattuck's work, *Forbidden Knowledge*, such questions have long been the topic of discussion across many areas of human endeavor—from fiction to religion to personal affairs. Metaphors such as the “forbidden fruit” of knowledge may have lost much of their saliency in contemporary Western intellectual culture, but the questions of whether certain types of knowledge should be deemed out of bounds and what sort of restrictions can be legitimately placed on such knowledge are still lively topics of discussion. Oddly enough, much of this debate is centered on scientific research, an activity otherwise portrayed as antithetical in character to the suggestion that wisdom is exercised in choosing not to know.

Subsequent to the events of 9/11, the debate about what is permissible and advisable in science has played out in relation to fears about national security. Statements about the revolution in knowledge brought about by developments in biotechnology, for instance, are now often accompanied by unsettling questions about how that knowledge might be applied. The results of biological research are being scrutinized not only for how they might *prevent* the spread of disease, but also how they

might *further* it. Mixing human and bird viruses can possibly provide valuable information on how bird viruses mutate to cause human pandemics; however, such information can also aid those who are seeking to cause such a pandemic. Generally, attention to the destructive potential of findings in the life sciences and in their laboratory materials and techniques has caused some to call into question many conventional presumptions. The suggestion that life is a secret whose code can be cracked through the techniques of modern biology can therefore have disturbing connotations.¹ How ought we to proceed in light of this development? Since 2001, a great deal of store has been set on the notion of a code of conduct that could steer researchers through these troubled waters.

Today, social research is likewise characterized by debate regarding whether certain paths of investigation are ill-advised and, therefore, what controls should govern inquiry. In varying degrees, research entails intervention into the lives of others, and with that follows concerns about the consequences. The conditions of confidentiality given to those taking part in studies represent somewhat mundane, but quite pervasive, examples of how bounds are set on what is tellable.

In relation to what social research is worthy of public support in the first place (and thereby, which research is not likely to be undertaken), in many countries renewed attention has been given to the need for policy “relevance.” Within this purview, furthering national security has been one aim identified.² Such a general call raises many issues about what constitutes appropriate research: To what extent ought social analysts seek to intervene so as to positively transform—rather than merely report on—the world? What roles can they fulfill in aiding policy? Who should set the criteria for what counts as success? At a general level, the call for *greater* relevance is meant to call into doubt customary answers to these long-standing questions.

Concerns about the appropriate bounds of social research also impinge on how investigations are reduced to writing. Traditionally, social researchers have sought to model not only their methods and questions on an idealized archetype of the physical sciences, but also the means by which they hoped to convey their findings. Particularly in those fields associated with policy analysis and security studies, the toleration for diverse forms of representation has been rather low. The hallmarks of conventional social research writing—including the detachment of researchers from those researched, the strict separation of “fact” and “fic-

tion,” and a lack of consideration of personal commitments—are often treated as central in the presentation of authoritative professional analysis.

A Brief Summary

Experimental Secrets tells a story about both the potential uses and the appropriate limits of research. Central concerns include what counts as legitimate knowledge and what rules should govern its generation. Attention is paid to the negotiation of “codes” that are intended to prevent the destructive application of the life sciences, govern the conduct of social research, and structure forms of representation. A recurring question posed in relation to these varied codes is: “What should be done, now?” In short, this book is an inquiry into “conditions of the possible” for inquiry.

The argument is based on my engagement between 2003 and 2007 with attempts to establish a “code of conduct” for civilian life scientists. That work began in earnest in 2004, with the awarding of a UK Economic and Social Research Council grant to Malcolm Dando (University of Bradford) and me. Because the British government was set to chair the meetings of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention in Geneva in 2005—this being the major international treaty banning bioweapons—much of our initial research related to the UK (see Parts I and II). Yet with international attention to codes of conduct on the rise during the buildup to the event in 2005, our work spread further afield.

At the same time I considered codes for those in the life sciences, I used my firsthand engagements to consider the invitations, dilemmas, and restrictions experienced by those seeking to intervene in public policy. This book tells the story of my attempts as a social researcher to achieve a balance between distance and closeness, within the sometimes opaque processes I was funded to examine.

That telling raises its own questions about the codes social researchers ought to abide by in offering accounts. Much of the work informing *Experimental Secrets* was undertaken in diplomatic and security-related worlds. Such worlds are occupied by those who claim access to vital intelligence and governmental information that cannot be divulged to outsiders. This poses questions for those, like the author, who are not operating as an established insider, where limits exist on what can be reported because of the disclosure agreements in place. Part I, for instance, includes a chapter titled “Concealing and Revealing—The Rule(s),

the Redacted, and the Caviar” that details the most well-known agreement of this type, the Chatham House Rule.

Anyone who is engaged in such diplomatic and security deliberations must ask themselves how they will act in light of these considerations. *Experimental Secrets* thematizes this sense of a limit on what gets said and what does not. In order to share these diplomatic and security-related worlds with others as lived experiences, part of my intent is to make the reader question just how much I am revealing, given the limitations imposed on what I am able to say.

Moreover, the book does not set out a definitive account of sequential events. This stems from my experience with codes of conduct as involving a process in which I was actively trying to determine what counts as relevant. And this is a matter I am still uncertain about, still struggling through, and still defining through my interactions in late 2008. I want the reader to struggle somewhat with figuring out the big picture because this was and is my experience. The reading evokes the doing, so to speak. The gaps in the story created between the chapters (in part through the use of different writing styles) are meant to speak to the gaps in my understanding. *Experimental Secrets* seeks a literary effect to convey a substantive argument, one that poses many questions about the political, ethical, and societal implications of what has transpired.

Some Notes on Form

In choosing a more literary route, *Experimental Secrets* challenges many of the conventions and standards of social analysis. It includes and tightly juxtaposes autoethnographic, realist, confessional, fictional and other styles of writing in order to question the limitations of any representational form.

Little doubt many readers will judge the narrative forms employed here—and particularly the autobiographical aspects of the book—as a departure from traditional analyses. As a departure such forms might be judged as suspect. Although storytelling through publications might not be common in many areas of policy or security studies, in recent years it has become more prevalent in the fields of law, history, sociology, and economics. The narrative form is often said to have an advantage over standard forms of writing because it is more accessible, it enables greater empathetic understanding, and it helps to highlight points of view that are often obscured. Yet the relative merits of narrative forms remain

issues of much debate among their detractors and even their proponents.³ Perhaps even more unconventional is the “autoethnographic” approach informing so much of this book.⁴

An author’s reasons for writing one way rather than some other way no doubt come down to many factors that are difficult to place, let alone faithfully describe. As I began to fashion this book at the start of 2007, however, two rationales—at once complementary and at odds with each other—were foremost in my mind.

One was the desire to give an account that resonates with my experiences. In this book, various engagements in the arms-control policy world are recalled. For the author, these were lived experiences of mutual insight, feelings of discomfort, spells of boredom, and fleeting but indelible glances. As noted by Church in *Forbidden Narratives*, “Academic accounts portray policy-making in distant and abstract terms. They make the process appear orderly, rational and linear; if they are populated by people at all it is by cognitive beings only.”⁵ My experience was not one of interacting with cognitive-only beings, nor was it a neat, orderly process. Why, then, should I attempt to tell it as such? To convey a sense of the policy process as a lived experience of agreement, negotiation, conflict and complicity, I have chosen not to give an after-the-fact upshot of what happened, but rather an account of the research process in “real time.”

In addition, what I was studying was not a distant “happening” somewhere “over there.” Rather, I was part of the unfolding of events as they took place. Because of this, I needed to consider not just how to conduct the analysis, but what actions I should initiate. As such, the intent beyond this book is to respect Alan Gouldner’s invitation for researchers to recognize that “knowledge of the world cannot be advanced apart from their own knowledge of themselves and their position within the social world.”⁶ A goal in attending to my location is to persuade you, as the reader, to see events in certain ways.

The other main reason for the narrative writing form I have chosen cuts in a slightly different direction. While the previous paragraphs used a language of position and representation, employing this “picture-book” perspective on the world is problematic. Seeking to understand the development of policy in the area of life-science codes was not akin to following, say, the progression of a favorite sporting match from the perspective of a spectator or even that of a player. Rather than watch specific individuals within a defined arena acting according to estab-

lished rules, I sought to figure out who was who, what sort of situation I was in, and what rules might be relevant. Trying to gauge the meaning of a possible course of action made it necessary to think about the wider context involved, yet my appreciation of “the context” was dependent upon my actions.

These points suggest an emergent, contingent, and revisable notion of understanding. Providing a narrative that seeks to convince the reader to appreciate events in particular way—as is the goal (for example) of adversarial summations by trial lawyers—would mean forgoing a consideration of the richness and complexity of my experiences. The seamless connection and purposefulness imposed on actions and objects within legalistic and other stories are often at odds with the randomness and purposelessness of our experiences. Life, as Alan Dershowitz argued, is not a dramatic narrative⁷—as, undoubtedly, the research process is not. But if this is so, then what kind of stories should we tell ourselves?

Any sense of providing a picture-book image of the world is also problematic because of what might be called the potential “otherwiseness” of any account. No single description of an event, object, or act can be either fully exhaustive or strictly compelled.⁸ Rather, it could be extended or else given in a different manner. Certainly, when it comes to describing the diverse activities associated with codes of conduct in the life sciences, the proposal that any specific rendition of “what happened” is absolutely necessary or complete seems rather implausible. Yet, alternative accounts that might be treated as “factually correct” for some purpose can lead to contrasting notions of what happened. In addition, over the course of security discussions, the need to modify accounts in light of disclosure arrangements raises questions about the range of accounts that are permissible. For this reason, exactly what is said should be acknowledged and its implications considered. What counts as the best or a permissible description is contestable. Narrative forms of writing are not somehow immune to the problems of the selectivity of accounts, but they may provide relatively novel resources for addressing them.⁹

A second reason for the general writing form chosen for this book, then, is to question how particular accounts of “what happened” are forwarded. This includes the claims of social analysts.¹⁰ My desire to offer an account that resonates with my experiences even as I question the conventions of accounting for events are not necessarily at odds. As Ankersmit contended in an examination of Hayden White’s analysis of

history, the major historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries treated the past as:

a sublime and quasi-divine spectacle that required the whole of their powerful personalities in order to become expressible in their writings. To them the past was not yet that tamed and domesticated reality which is the product and counterpart of the methods and canons of contemporary disciplinary historical writing. To them, the past can only be rendered if it resonates in the depth of historians' own souls and evokes there the essentially poetic response testifying to their actual encounters.¹¹

As such, historical reality would slip out of the grasp of those who took for granted their means of knowing.

In considering the basis of claims, this work seeks to set itself apart from one subclass of autobiographical writing that is often taken quite seriously in public debate: the political memoir. In offering personal glimpses into the inner workings of otherwise opaque events, memoirs can gain sizeable media attention. They can also be taken as vital evidence in historical analyses, only because they offer a source of unique material. Particularly in relation to matters of security and statecraft, the power of the memoir purports to reveal what would otherwise be kept secret. When the former British ambassador to Washington offered a firsthand account of the personal interactions between Prime Minister Blair and President George Bush in the buildup to the 2003 Iraq war, the basic elements were in place for a provocative and much anticipated book.¹²

All too often, however, the lure of statecraft memoirs rests on a steadfast avoidance of an examination of the basis for claims. The impressionistic, and even whimsical, quality of many firsthand depictions too often blocks scrutiny of the author's self-representation. Telling a "merely" personal story of events offers little justification for not inquiring into the limits or contingency of understanding. A certain unexamined self-assurance pervades many memoirs of elite individuals—a sense that if you knew what the author did you would naturally think what he or she thought. This, of course, is buttressed by the reader's invariably not having had access to the matters at hand.

Likewise, while much of the appeal of statecraft memoirs comes from revealing what would otherwise be hidden, rarely do they reflect on how the partial and particular revelations they offer conceal as they

reveal. Especially in relation to matters of national security, the consequences of the choices made in what *not* to mention are worthy of attention. The complete omission of certain events can radically alter the meaning given to stories. Alluding in a roundabout manner to certain issues can tempt the reader to fill in the gaps. A tacit assertion of authentic personal inner-revelation accompanies accounts that purport to disclose hidden affairs. Like confessions, revelations invite the reader into particular a moral relation with the author.¹³

If, as is now commonplace in the study of language, descriptions are not simply treated as efforts to represent the world, but as forms of action in constituting an understanding of a world,¹⁴ then claims to reveal need to be treated carefully. Scrutiny should be given to what revealing entails as well as to how claims about whether “it” has “happened” are made.¹⁵ An autobiographical form of writing informed by this orientation directs that scrutiny to one’s own claims. In this book I want to use the negotiation of notions of memory, agency, and identity in the research process to inquire into self-knowledge and self-representation.

In *Experimental Secrets*, the uncertainties identified through that inquiry raise questions about the place of the “real.” The reconstructed remembering of events and thoughts given here is not meant to be read as spotless recollection. When a certain doubting or at least questioning of one’s understanding is combined with a rejection of an analyst’s ability to offer aseptic, authoritative, “just-so” accounts, then what and how to represent become rather pressing issues. When a further imperative is introduced—to conceal many details of events and people—then questions about representation become ever more urgent.

In telling a story that at once resonates with my experiences while questioning how an understanding is formed, the distinction between “fact” and “fiction” is put onto the table for examination. My intent in using such writing forms is not to deceive the reader into thinking something happened that patently did not—or make you dear reader believe what I do not. No deliberate attempt is made to mislead you about my understanding of the issues at hand. Yet in choosing how to conceal certain identifying information, in giving only one description among many possible descriptions, and in providing a personal reflection on my experiences that risks self-deception, I am mindful of the limitations of any account. The use of what might be labeled “factional” writing is an effort to bring to the fore the negotiation of choices and constraints. The “Notes” section provides additional points about the chapters. It is worth

flagging at the outset, however, that the chapters that fall under the heading, "A Thought Mistaken for a Memory," present composite sketches inspired by numerous discussions. So while the anchors of these chapters are many, they are many.

I recall how the British director Ken Loach, when asked about his blending of historical events with devised characters and stories, proposed that the key question for judging one of his films was not, "Is it true?" but rather "What is the truth in it?" To modify that suggestion, I would ask that this book tell us something of how we understand what we accept to be so.

Experimental Secrets is, then, an exploration of the prospects and tensions of knowing. It is an inquiry into the limits of inquiry. It is situated between a commitment to accurately represent and a questioning of what any representation provides. It seeks to employ a narrative form to tell a credible and persuasive story while attending to what makes certain accounts credible and persuasive. It offers, to paraphrase Taussig, revelations of concealment meant to diminish the craving for certainty that secrecy inspires.¹⁶ It describes a particular set of events while seeking to draw general lessons from them. It offers a "readable" story line driven by a plot while asking what sort of story is "writable."¹⁷ It invites the reader into a relation of reading *simpliciter* while reading *cultura*.¹⁸ The actions of the author are both the means and the object of study. The breakdown of the distinction between "fact" and "fiction" and "revealing" and "concealing" in my account is meant to exemplify, and thereby illustrate, how such distinctions break down in policy formation.

Overall, an imperative underlying this book is that representation is too important to be taken for granted. Those concerned with validity and the analytical potential of writing should trouble themselves regarding the choices they make and forgo, or else they risk mistaking convention for consideration. With experimental breaks comes the potential for failure. Yet, to paraphrase Butler in this regard: I wish to be intelligible and taken seriously, in my pursuit of novel forms of argumentation, but I will not be troubled if this is not entirely so.¹⁹

Notes

1. For an examination of the themes of codes and life, see: Zylinska, Joanna. 2007. "The Secret of Life." *Cultural Studies* 21(1): 95-117.
2. As in the Economic and Social Research Council's *Thematic Priorities 2000*, Swindon: ESRC.
3. See: Turner, R. Steven. 2001., "On Telling Regulatory Tales." *Social Studies of Science* 31(4): 475-506.
4. See, for example: Ellis, C. 1995. *Final Negotiations*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Ellis, C., and Bochner, A. 2000. "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity." In: N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 733-768; Reed-Danahay, D. 1997. *Auto/Ethnography*. New York: Berg; A. Bochner and C. Ellis (eds.). 2002. *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*. New York: AltaMira; Sparkes, A. C. 2002. *Telling tales in sport and physical activity*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
5. Church, Kathryn. 1995. *Forbidden Narratives*. London: Routledge: 88.
6. Gouldner, Alvin W. 1973. *For Sociology*. London: Allen Lane.
7. Dershowitz, Alan. 1995. "Life is Not a Dramatic Narrative." In *Law's Stories*. Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz (eds.) London: Yale University Press.
8. See, for example, Edwards, D. 1997. *Discourse and Cognition*. London: Sage: Chapter 1.
9. Brooks, Peter. 1995. "The Law as Narrative and Rhetoric." In *Law's Stories*. Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz (eds.) London: Yale University Press: 17.
10. Here my inspiration comes from a range of works in the sociology of science, often labeled together as "new literary" forms or reflexive texts. See, for example: Ashmore, M. 1989. *The Reflexive Thesis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Mulkay, M. 1985. *The Word and the World*. London: Allen and Unwin; and *Knowledge and Reflexivity*. 1988. Woolgar, S. (ed.), London: Sage.
11. Ankersmit, F. R. 1998. "Hayden White's Appeal to the Historians." *History and Theory* 37: 187.
12. Meyer, Christopher. 2005. *DC Confidential*. London: Phoenix.
13. Seidman, Louis Michael. 1995. "Some Stories about Confessions and Confessions about Stories." *Law's Stories*. Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz (eds.). London: Yale University Press.
14. Potter, J. 1997. *Representing Reality*. London: Sage and Potter; Wetherell, J. and M. 1987. *Discourse and Social Psychology*. London: Sage.
15. So, as in this preface, offering two underlying rationales for the choice made in what is written—while noting there may possibly be others difficult to specify—does not merely divulge motivations in an innocent manner. Rather, it

proposes cutting off inquiring into certain matters in order to carry the inquiry down other lines.

16. Taussig, M. 2003. "Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism. Another Theory of Magic." In *Magic and Modernity*. B. Meyer and P. Pels (eds.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 305.

17. To draw on a distinction made by Paul Atkinson (1992), in *Understanding Ethnographic Texts*, London: Sage: 6.

18. To use a distinction elaborated by Livingston, E. 2006. "The Textuality of Pleasure." *New Literary History*, 37: 655–672.

19. Comments by Judith Butler at a conference entitled, "The Collapse of Traditional Knowledge: Economy, Technology, Geopolitics," Durham, NC, January 26, 2007.
