

back.” He writes that in cases such as these, verifying facts is less important than learning more about local politics. In addition, he points out the ethical issues that are raised, suggesting that since the dead cannot speak for themselves, representing them with empathy is important for researchers. Doing so provides rich context to allow a better understanding of participants’ worlds and the choices they made, despite the discomfort they cause.

Taken as a whole, the contributions to this symposium offer distinctive critical reflections on the possibilities and limitations of employing member-checking as a standard practice in political science. Moreover, while member-checking usually implies that the researcher engages in the procedure after the conclusion of field research and articulation of the project’s findings, the

symposium’s essays examine how member-checking might work in surprising ways at different stages of the research process. They also provide practical insight into how field researchers can navigate tensions between locals’ and researchers’ understandings of the political phenomena under investigation. Finally, member-checking has been gaining ground among interpretive and even some qualitative researchers, and Schwartz-Shea (2014) demonstrates in an analysis of methods textbooks that member-checking is an appropriate way to assess the quality of a study. In this sense, both positivists and interpretivists alike will find something of value here. It is our hope that this symposium will generate debate and discussion regarding this key methodological topic.

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“My Participants Told Me I Got It Wrong. Now What Do I Do?”

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The question which the title poses was asked by Allison Quatrini at the 2016 “Textual Analysis and Critical Semiotics” APSA Short Course. In methods terms, one answer to it might be “member-checking,” discussed here in its contemporary understanding as an activity carried out at some point after a research encounter (an interview, an interaction, an observation) is completed in which the researcher “checks” with the situational member about the former’s understanding of the latter’s words, experiences, or both. It is understood as a strategy to optimize the descriptive,

interpretive, or theoretical validity of qualitative research findings (Sandelowski 2008). Given the qualitative or interpretivist methodological goal of understanding the lived experiences and lifeworlds of research participants, the idea has intuitive appeal. Why not “check back” with those studied to assess one’s understanding of what they’ve said or done? The method has increasingly been adopted among interpretive and some qualitative researchers conducting interviews and participant-observer/ethnographic field research. Indeed, Schwartz-Shea’s (2014) analysis of methods textbooks shows that

member-checking has become an accepted indicator of the quality of a research project—that it follows expected standards for particular research methods. Researchers can use it to demonstrate that their manuscript meets methods criteria; reviewers can use it to assess whether, indeed, it does. Having and knowing such “standardized technical procedures,” as Elliot Eisner (1979, 73) pointed out, provides “[o]ne of the sources of intellectual security for doctoral students as well as for professors.”

Yet the “why not?” question hides much. Member-checking is not an unmitigated good: its conceptualization warrants critical assessment, rather than blanket endorsement. Following a brief history of the concept’s use and a working definition, this essay discusses what needs to be problematized in its treatment, including things often overlooked in methods texts’ discussions. Focusing on what “checking” means, these include:

- What, precisely, is to be sent back: A quotation? An interview transcript? A portion of a manuscript? The entire manuscript?
- When in the course of a research project should that be sent—immediately after an interview? When a draft manuscript is finished? On publication?
- To whom should materials be sent—all participants? Some? Which ones?

Answers to these questions raise potential ethical questions, including concerning handling feedback. Exploring these matters reveals the methodological presuppositions underlying the language of “member-checking” and some of its practices: the presumption of a single correct truth and of who possesses it. Whereas these presuppositions may not be problematic for positivist-informed qualitative research, they do raise challenges for interpretive research. Gaining clarity on the practices is important for both methodological approaches.

What is “Member-Checking”?

Member-checking refers to the practice of communicating some aspect of one’s research to one or more of the persons among whom that research was conducted. Which aspect and which persons are discussed below.

The practice seems to have been enacted some three decades (at least) before it was named. In his widely read methods appendix to the second edition of *Street Corner*

Society, a three-and-a-half-year-long participant-observer study of a neighborhood in “Cornerville” (Boston’s North End), William Foote Whyte writes about sharing his thinking with “Doc,” one of the “corner boys”: “Much of our time was spent in this discussion of ideas and observations, so that Doc became, in a very real sense, a collaborator in the research” (Whyte 1955, 301). But Doc’s involvement also included reading the manuscript: “...we had long conversations over his suggestions and criticism.” And Whyte “also had innumerable feedback discussions with Sam Franco”—the settlement house director who read his study of the Nortons, the gang of boys Doc led who hung out on Norton Street—“before hiring Doc to direct a storefront recreation center” (Whyte 1993, 289).

The concept was apparently formalized, however, only toward the late 1970s. Writing in 1981, Egon Guba noted its epistemological focus: “In establishing truth value, then, naturalistic inquirers are most concerned with testing the credibility of their findings and interpretations with the various sources (audiences or groups) from which data were drawn. The testing of credibility is often referred to as doing ‘member checks,’ that is, testing the data with members of the relevant human data source groups” (Guba 1981, 80). He elaborated: In member checks,

data and interpretations are *continuously tested as they are derived* with members of the various audiences and groups from which data are solicited. The process of member checks is the single most important action inquirers can take, for it goes to the heart of the credibility criterion. Inquirers ought to be able to document both having made such checks as well as the ways in which the inquiry was altered (emerged or unfolded) as a result of member feedback. (Guba 1981, 83; italics added)

Note Guba’s original conceptualization of “member checks” and “member feedback” as the *ongoing, fieldwork-based* testing of the researcher’s understanding.

Following its discussion by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the concept was taken up more widely by qualitative researchers in sociology and other fields beyond the educational evaluation community in which it originated. By the time of that publication, however, Guba’s initial conceptualization had shifted to the act of sending the researcher’s draft case study back to the “respondents at the case site(s)” in order to “test its credibility” (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 373).¹ Still, in both treatments, member-

¹ Schwartz-Shea (this issue) explicitly distinguishes between these two understandings of member-checking.

checking was explicitly intended as a way of addressing the question: Did I get “it” right? Guba and Lincoln (1985), Erlandson et al. (1993), and Miles and Huberman (1994) all positioned member-checking as a test on credibility, the latter still using the language of getting “feedback from informants.”

These treatments were formulated in the face of encroaching 1970s behavior(al)ism and its realist-objectivist bases. In positioning member-checking as lying at “the heart” of research and researcher credibility, these methodologists were seeking to explicate the scientific character of qualitative methods, especially vis à vis a researcher’s possible “bias,” a key topic of debate at the time. Attacks focused on qualitative researchers’ seeming lack of objectivity and, hence, the questionable trustworthiness of their “findings.” Defenses were mounted by some of the leading qualitative methodologists of the day, including Donald Campbell, Elliot Eisner, and Egon Guba. In his 1978 monograph we can see Guba working out the arguments that appeared in subsequent publications, including the initial framing of what became member-checking. For example, concerning “establishing credibility of findings,” he wrote: “Since so much of naturalistic inquiry depends upon the perceptions of informants, it is essential that they find the data and inference of a naturalistic study credible and persuasive” (Guba 1978, 65). Note that his assumed audience is neither manuscript reviewers nor other researchers, but instead the participants in the educational programs he is evaluating—the educators and other professionals who were potentially his readers as well as his “informants.”

Guba (1978, 65) quotes Eisner, in a work then in press, calling the approach “multiplicative corroboration—the use of...peers to pass judgment on what has been structurally corroborated.” And he quotes Campbell, in an article also at the time in press, proposing a similar method, called “participant evaluation,” using participants to provide credibility checks:

‘Participants...will usually have a better observational position than will [...] outside observers of a new program. They usually have experienced the preprogram conditions [...such that] [t]heir experience of the program will have been more relevant, direct and valid, less vicarious [than the researcher’s]. Collectively, their greater numerosity will average out observer idiosyncrasies that might dominate the report of any one [researcher].’ (Campbell, quoted in Guba 1978, 66)

Guba continues: “Assurance of credibility of the final result of a naturalistic inquiry is probably best obtained through frequent and thorough interaction with informants as the information develops. In this fashion information with limited credibility can be identified early and either eliminated or buttressed” (1978, 66). He adds that this might be thought to expose the researcher “to untoward influences,” but that such exposure might be safeguarded through the use of other methods listed previously in the monograph. And he concludes, in words echoed in his later writings,

It is likely that the criterion of respondent credibility is the single most important judgment that can be brought to bear on a naturalistic inquiry. Without it one can have no sense that the findings and inferences have any reality, particularly since so much depends upon the perceptions of people. With it, except in the case of a general conspiracy to mislead the investigator, one can be reasonably sure that the findings do reflect the insights and judgments of a large group of people coming from different perspectives. (Guba 1978, 66)

Problematizing the Concept

Guba in 1978 is concerned with the credibility of respondents. By the mid-1980s, concern about the trustworthiness of the researcher’s “findings” had shifted to researchers’ presentations of individuals’ views in the written manuscript. Member-checking was now treated as a control on that. Each of its two components—“member” and “checking”—calls for critical examination, as does the researcher’s response to feedback received. These are often not engaged in treatments of the concept in the methods literature (Locke and Velamuri, 2009, excepted). As Nicholas Rush Smith (this issue) explores various aspects of what it means to be a “member,” I will focus on what checking entails, taking up the question of member identity in that context. My own ethical baseline for this discussion—a concern missing in the methods literature—is that *one should not even engage the prospect of sending something to a situational member to “check” unless one is prepared to take the response seriously*. This means dealing with it in some fashion, at a minimum thanking the individual who makes the time to read the item and comment on it, whatever the tone of the response. Beyond that, the response might be discussed in one’s research manuscript, which I take up below.

What Should a Researcher Send Back?

Guba's initial treatments of member-checking in the context of educational evaluation reports make clear that what is to be sent back is a draft case study. As the concept came into wider use, however, this delimited object shifted in scope. Taken up widely in interview research, it came to mean the transcript of a single interview, whether of a recording or of the researcher's notes, to be sent back to the person interviewed who would be asked to corroborate the written text. Beyond that, including in participant-observation and ethnography, the boundedness of the object became even fuzzier. Should one send a portion of a manuscript in which an individual had been quoted—or send the single quote only? What about passages reporting paraphrased conversations, rather than direct quotes? Should one send entire paper or article drafts? Book-length manuscripts? What about descriptions—for example, of events, acts or interactions? Rather than providing definitive answers, I intend these questions to provoke critical reflection.

To Whom Should Material be Sent?

Determining what to send interacts with the identity or role of the intended recipient. Again, matters are clearest when it comes to interview research: a transcript or summarizing notes could be sent to the person interviewed. The requested action is also contained: the “member” is asked to respond to the text's accuracy. Indeed, it could be unethical to send it to anyone else, something to which I return.

But as the written material expands in scope beyond spoken words, the range of intended recipients also grows. Consider a paper, article or book chapter draft, which includes not only direct quotes but also paraphrased material. Even if the work focuses on a single actor (e.g., Mintzberg 1970; Wolcott 1973; Behar 1993), the researcher is likely to have spoken with others in the field setting, at times at length. Should the manuscript be sent to all of them? And field research manuscripts of whatever length are also likely to include observational data—of settings, events, acts, interactions, and so on. Should these also be included in member-checking?

In her critical assessment of *Street Corner Society*, for instance, Boelen (1992, 33-34) asked whether Whyte had “commit[ted] an ethical cardinal sin by not taking his manuscript back to the field and checking the data and contents with the subjects.” Whyte—who reported having discussed his observations extensively with “Doc”—replied, “At the time of my study, I had never heard of such an obligation” (Whyte 1993, 289). In

much of his subsequent work, he noted, he did discuss findings and interpretations with participants. He also shifted to doing participatory action research, which he found useful for “getting the facts straight,” among other things (Whyte 1989, 381). Then he took up the matter of implementing Boelen's idea:

How does one feed back the data and contents of such a study to a community of 20,000 people—or even to the parts of the community I focused on? Should I have fed back my findings on the social ranking and leadership pattern to the Nortons, as a group? When I once asked them who their leader was, they stated they were all equal. To reveal to them that behaviorally they were not equal would have embarrassed Doc and upset his followers. (Whyte 1993, 289)

Such upset did, in fact, take place, but years later, at someone else's hand.

When in the Course of the Research Should Something be Sent?

The scope of the material can determine the timing of its transmission. An interview transcript may be sent back immediately after transcribing a recording or notes. With more material, however, the timing is less clear-cut. Draft papers, articles, chapters, and book-length manuscripts are usually completed after many conversations and interviews have been conducted. Often, then, more time elapses between the interaction and the sending. Here is where problems of two sorts arise.

One concerns memory. Researchers have tapes or contemporaneous notes; participants rarely do. Aside from lapses of memory, social, political, organizational, or personal circumstances may have changed such that what had been said months earlier seems no longer tenable and individuals “cannot believe” they actually said what they are quoted or paraphrased as saying (especially in light of intervening events) or regret or do not recollect their previously-held views.

A second arises from presenting spoken material (whether from formal interviews or less formal conversations, depending on research design) drawn from more than one source. Longer manuscripts may also include descriptions of the researcher's observations of research settings, events (such as meetings), acts, interactions, and so on. The further along one is in deskwork and textwork processes (Yanow 2000), the more the writing has likely incorporated ideas informed

by academic concepts and theoretical literatures. The resulting juxtapositions may render individuals' words in an entirely different light than they had imagined—including analytic arguments that do not comport with their own sense of settings, persons, or events.

Related to both of these, there is the phenomenon of seeing one's words in print, something people interviewed by journalists also experience: even when the quote or paraphrase is accurate, seeing one's words in print may frame them in a new light. If they are excerpted from a longer statement and juxtaposed with others' words or with the researcher's analytic comments, they may appear to the speaker as having been "taken out of context"—a

phrase commonly used to signal the speaker's sense that the words are being used (twisted?) to make the writer's point, rather than the speaker's.

With all manuscripts, researchers might choose to wait until publication to share them with members. This is the ultimate way of controlling speakers' responses to seeing their words in print, as it leaves the researcher with a diminished ability to engage those responses. In fact, in this symposium, Schwartz-Shea rules out such "sharing" as a legitimate form of member-checking.

Table 1 summarizes the discussion, moving from lesser to greater researcher control over the scope of possible responses.

Table 1. Implementing Member-Checking: What, to Whom, When?

What to share?	With whom?	When?
Transcript or notes from a single interview, with direct quotes	Person spoken with or interviewed	During deskwork/textwork <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • after transcription • prior to or during analysis • while analyzing or writing
Interview summary notes, with paraphrased material	Person spoken with or interviewed	During deskwork/textwork <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • after transcription • prior to or during analysis • while analyzing or writing
Excerpt from paper, article or chapter draft including direct quotes and paraphrased material, plus descriptions of settings, events, and analysis	Person(s) whose words are presented Person(s) involved in settings, events, acts, interactions described	During deskwork/textwork <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • after transcription • after drafting analysis • after drafting excerpt
Full paper, article, chapter or book manuscript draft including direct quotes, paraphrased material, and observations	Person(s) whose words are presented Person(s) involved in settings, events, acts, interactions described "Gatekeeper(s)"	During deskwork/textwork when draft is completed
Published manuscript	Person(s) whose words are presented Person(s) involved in settings, events, acts, interactions described "Gatekeeper(s)"	Part of textwork dissemination

Reacting to Responses

When member checking is carried out... [and] written about,[the encounters] are often portrayed as conflict-free, and the “benevolent” image of the researcher who shares the final work with participants is reinforced. (Caretta and Pérez 2019, 361)²

If they read the item sent to them for comment, readers’ reactions can range from indifference to outrage. How should the researcher react to comments that say, “You got it wrong!”? What if different participants give divergent responses? I know of no definitive set of answers to that situation. Here are some possible ways to think about it.

First, as we are, after all, as human as anyone else, researchers should double-check their text and notes. If one discovers an error, corrections are in order—along with thanks to the person who caught it, perhaps adding an acknowledgement in the manuscript.

But what if the researcher is convinced he didn’t “get it wrong”? Having an audio- or videotape or stills of an interview or event makes handling this situation easier, as the researcher can then send “proof” of the quoted text. Detailed interview or field notes might also be persuasive. Having no notes but only one’s memory becomes problematic for arguing for one’s view of what transpired. I know of no easy solution for this interpersonal uneasiness. However, this formulation of the situation suggests a world in which the point of the exchange is to verify spoken language (or observed acts), rather than to assess the broader gestalt of the situation—including what the researcher learned from other parts of the conversation or observed event(s), other conversations or acts at other times, and words or deeds articulated or committed by other situational actors. Here, one is on somewhat firmer, though not necessarily easier, ground, especially if it is not the “facts” of the situation that are in question but, instead, the analysis. What individual members often do not take into account is that researchers commonly have access to other interlocutors and that the written material—if it is more than an interview transcript—may also reflect the views learned from those persons. That may explain why what the member is reading does not comport with that member’s views. This can be pointed out—which might lead to a prolonged back-and-forth over what constitutes “the truth” of the situation. This exchange may generate

additional data and new insights into the research topic, which may become part of a revised manuscript. Here is also where having promised confidentiality to all respondents can be brought to bear (against pressure to answer the question, “But who said that?!” and, if need be, pointing out that the same promise extends to this member vis à vis others). Explaining that the analysis also reflects debates in the researcher’s theoretical community, leading to other views than those of the situational member, may or may not be persuasive, depending on the interests of the protesting or complaining member.

And then there is the matter of handling comments “logistically” in a revised draft. I have seen these treated in three ways. One buries the dispute in an endnote or footnote—as if hoping the problem will disappear. Another draws the contested view into the text, engaging the differences substantively. This move may treat the disagreement as new “evidence,” serving potentially as the basis for additional analysis, as mentioned above. A third ignores the dispute altogether.³ If one claims in one’s methods section, however, to have done member-checking, a reader might reasonably expect to know how it was conducted, with what results, and if a dispute ensued, how it was engaged, and where in the manuscript. Ignoring the response is, then, not a practical action, quite aside from the ethics of inviting people to respond and then ignoring their replies or of using contested information without discussing the dispute. Table 2 summarizes possible member reactions and researcher responses.

My intention is to note these moves in the hope of sparking reflection and discussion, not to endorse one over another; as others may be possible. Here, for example, James C. Scott (1985, xix) brings other dimensions to bear, writing in the Preface:

This book is...more the product of its subjects than most village studies. When I began research, my idea was to develop my analysis, write the study, and then return to the village to collect the reactions, opinions, and criticisms of villagers to a short oral version of my findings. These reactions would then comprise the final chapter—a kind of “villagers talk back” section or, if you like, “reviews” of the book by those who should know. I did in fact spend the better part of the last two months in Sedaka collecting such opinions from most

² Caretta and Pérez are concerned with using member-checking to increase participants’ involvement in research, which adds other dimensions not engaged here.

³ This third move has come to light in conference corridor chats and seminar discussions with students. After all, as editor Jennifer Cyr asks, how would a reader know if it were done?

Table 2. Responding to the “Member’s” Reaction

Member reaction (Note: These are not direct quotes.)	Researcher response
Any	Thank you (for your time, your effort, ...) Possible acknowledgement in the final manuscript
“You took my words out of context; what I really said/meant was...”	Check notes, recording: Did I get it “wrong”? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes? Revise (and send acknowledgement) • No? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Write back, including evidence from notes or tape ○ Ask for follow-up visit for further discussion; bring evidence ○ Include “dispute” in text and discuss ○ Include “dispute” in a footnote or endnote ○ Ignore
“I’m going to prevent you from publishing...” “If you publish that, you will never do research here again!”	See Mosse (2005, 2006) ³ Modify one’s text (see Schwartz-Shea, this issue; Caretta and Pérez 2019, 367-68)

villagers. Amidst a variety of comments—often reflecting the speaker’s class—were a host of insightful criticisms, corrections, and suggestions of issues I had missed. All of this changed the analysis but presented a problem. Should I subject the reader to the earlier and stupider version of my analysis and only at the end spring the insights the villagers had brought forward? This was my first thought, but as I wrote I found it impossible to write as if I did not know what I now knew, so I gradually smuggled all those insights into my own analysis. The result is to understate the extent to which the villagers of Sedaka were responsible for the analysis as well as raw material of the study and to make what was a complex conversation seem more like a soliloquy.

To clarify the issues raised by researcher-initiated member-checking, whatever its form, consider the circumstance in which someone other than the researcher brings the published findings back to the persons among whom the research was conducted. Ellis’ 1986 study provides one example. The sociology professor who had introduced him as an undergrad to her research setting

brought her book—of whose publication members were unaware—with him on a visit to one community. He read them key passages; several residents were infuriated by the descriptions of themselves and their family members (Ellis 1995). In another example, Boelen (1992) relates revisiting Whyte’s “Cornerville” twenty-five times over nineteen years, thirty to forty-five years after he concluded the research (Whyte 1993, 285). In stays of up to three months, she tracked down “Doc’s” sons and members of other “gangs” and told them about the book. Many claimed not to have known about it, contradicting Whyte’s own narrative. Boelen discusses various aspects of his account with them; they confirm some, refuting others.⁴ Neither of these examples would be considered “member-checking” as that has been defined and enacted historically.⁵ Including them in a critical discussion of the method, however, might help make explicit not only the potential of such checking and its limitations, but also its ethical ramifications.

Ethical and Methodological Issues in Checking with Members

Sending things back may have unanticipated and unintended consequences for others. Consider the

4 Because so many have picked up on Boelen’s critique of Whyte, it is worth noting that her reconstruction of events thirty to forty-five years later is not unproblematic, as are her assumptions concerning life in Italy, on which she based on her own lived experience there, seemingly as an adolescent. Boelen’s critique appears in a symposium “*Street Corner Society, Revisited*” in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, including responses from Angelo Ralph Orlandella (“Sam Franco” in the book) and Whyte. Arthur Vidich’s essay there (1992) is especially useful in thinking about member-checking.

5 Buroway (2009, 99-100) treats Boelen’s dissection of Whyte’s research as a type of “ethnographic revisit,” which might be considered a different form of checking on one’s interpretations when it is the researcher doing the revisiting.

case in which permission to access the setting—say, an organization—was granted by the Executive Director. It would be logical, then, to send material back to that individual. Supposing the research had been conducted among that person’s subordinates and that the manuscript includes analyses of their acts alongside critical assessments (theirs or the researcher’s) of the Executive Director. What pressures might that individual bring to bear on the researcher to reveal subordinates’ identities? What might be the consequences for those subordinates of having their views made public—or for the Director?⁶ In other words, the power dimensions at play in research settings may enfold the researcher, unfurling in unanticipated ways. Considering field research as an intervention in the setting under study may bring these relationships and consequences to the fore. This view of research is an alternate to the earlier concerns out of which member-checking grew, which sought to minimize the impact of the researcher on the setting. It is more in keeping with interpretive approaches in particular, which increasingly emphasize the relational character of research (see, e.g., Fujii 2018 in the context of interview research).

Some researchers, irrespective of methodological bent, consider member-checking a way to give something back to the people among whom they conducted their research. Several raised this point, for example, at a day-long mini-conference on political ethnography at the 2017 French Association of Political Science meeting, and it surfaces in discussions with US and other researchers.⁷ Field researchers’ feeling that they “need” to give something back derives from the sense of having benefited from participants’ metaphoric gifts (of their time, hospitality, and so on), leaving an “imbalance” in the relationship which needs to be righted (much like the potlatch of the Northwest Pacific Indigenous peoples [see, e.g., Kan 1989] or US Christmas card list-keeping are intended to achieve). Some fields of inquiry—sociology, for instance (see Walby 2010, 643)—and some research designs—notably experiments—compensate participants financially or otherwise. For some researchers who do not pay participants, sending back a transcript or a draft manuscript feels like it rights the imbalance of indebtedness.

A version of this feeling of wanting to “pay” participants back emerges in organizational studies field research. Organizational members often approach researchers after the latter have been hanging around for some weeks, asking when they are going to share their “findings”—and researchers feel the pressure to comply as a way of repaying a social or informational debt. (Indeed, such requests often catch PhD students unawares.) Aside from the power dimensions, this scenario raises ethical concerns regarding a researcher’s making information public in the absence of either a literal or a social contract supporting such revelations.⁸ Additionally, as Schein (1999) notes, most researchers—lacking training as consultants—do not have the professional wherewithal to deal with the unintended emotional or psychological consequences for situational members of these sorts of interventions, not to mention for themselves. What might appear as “simple” member-checking, then, may have serious consequences, including internal organizational disruptions, demotions, or firings, as well as individual distress and interpersonal strife.

These sorts of reactions take place, too, in other than organizational settings and in different forms. Mosse’s experience is a key example (see n. 4). Whereas his may be an extreme case of readers’ responses, it suggests a caution: some forms of member-checking might raise expectations (as inappropriate as these might be) that the researcher will refrain from critically assessing the social practices and institutions in which participants are embedded. (For further discussion of this point, see Schwartz-Shea, in this symposium.)

Concluding Reflections

The more we poke at the character of member-checking as presented in methods textbooks, the clearer the underlying methodological presuppositions become. The concept presumes that social realities are singular: there is one “truth” of events, acts, and so forth, which the researcher is working to unearth. In this singularity, the member’s “truth” trumps that of the researcher. Member-checking privileges the member’s account of what was said or of what transpired, ignoring other dimensions of social scientific research. Central among these is the fact that the researcher may know things that the member in question does not, having cast a wide research net in

6 As I wrote this, news and other media were filled with stories of pressures being brought on White House staffers to reveal the identities of Anonymous (2018), the author of a critical op-ed in the *New York Times*, and those quoted in Bob Woodward’s just-published *Fear*. As I revise it over a year later, Anonymous is back in the news, now with a book (2019), and those pressures have resumed.

7 For a wide range of thinking on the topic, see Brettell (1993) and Gupta and Kelly (2014).

8 That is, researchers may have formal contracts with “gatekeepers” who granted them access, but that does not necessarily accord them ethical or other permission to reveal what they learned from those individuals’ subordinates.

order to inquire at various levels or arenas of the setting being researched, so that various viewpoints at play in the field setting are brought to bear on the research question (a political science and organizational studies research practice that anthropologist George Marcus, 1995, captured in the phrase “multi-sited ethnography”). These multiple points of view—multiple “truths”—are then reflected in the research writing, such that any single member’s view(s) would be considered alongside others’. Additionally, researchers are engaged in conversation with particular literatures and their theories and ideas, which may contribute additional theoretical insights to the study and analysis and which may challenge local “truths.” On this point, too, Whyte’s comment is instructive:

Note that Boelen [in her critique of his Cornerville study] deals with field relations only in terms of the researcher’s presumed obligations to those studied. She does not consider the right of the researcher to publish conclusions and interpretations as he or she sees them. How to balance our obligations to those we study against our rights as authors to publish our findings is a complex question that cannot be answered by dealing only with our obligations to informants. (1993, 289)

In the end, the concept of member-checking is too slender a reed on which to hang the complexities of studying and interpreting the multiple truths that characterize social realities, which may emerge in the

course of field research. As a hoped-for magic potion to eliminate researcher “bias,” member-checking has failed. Today, not only is the relational character of research on the table, but so are the ways in which writing constructs readers’ knowledge of the settings, persons, and events or interactions being presented (see, e.g., Marcus and Fischer 1986) and, hence, the researcher’s responsibility for the form and character of that writing (Ellis 1995). The challenge, then, is to develop more robust ways to engage the scientific character of field research encounters and their interpretation, in an ethical fashion.

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