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Confusion, Truth, and Bureaucracy: A reply to Fitzgerald and Callard

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Des Fitzgerald and Felicity Callard have [recently offered some advice](#), a normative orientation even, for those engaging in collaboration:

“Living well in a collaborative mode is about resisting the urge to sort things out – it is about quelling the desire to be clear, at all times, on who ‘I’ am, and what ‘I’ am doing, and whether or not ‘I’ am getting anything out of this anyway. Indeed, much of our own learning to live in this mode has not at all been about clarifying things, but about learning to play with them – and play, as [Andrew Balmer](#) reminds us in his association of collaboration with BDSM, is a complex and at times violent ethical structure. Certainly, it allows the collaborator to confuse her subjectivity and her subjection. It might even help her to learn to find joy and insight in that confusion.”

One wonders what to make of such happy advice. The dictionary offers two possible definitions of confusion: (1) the lack of understanding; uncertainty; and (2) the state of being bewildered or unclear. There can be no doubt that close engagement with the contemporary sciences generates uncertainty—after all, the contemporary sciences operate midst a certain level of opacity about their own objects, problems, or futures. And it is certainly the case that this uncertainty and opacity can serve as one setting within which joy and insight become possible for collaborators. John Dewey put it well when he insisted that breakdown and indeterminacy are occasions for thinking, and thinking, when worked through generates a certain pleasure.

But collaboration can generate pleasure for many reasons and those reasons are linked to a diverse range of possible modes of engagement. So the question is less whether or not collaboration, however difficult, generates the possibility of pleasure—even joy. The question, rather, is: what modes of interaction generate which kinds of affects, to what effect, and at what cost?

“Joy and insight” internal to a state of confusion might be the result of (a) once having been confused, (b) engaging in inquiry and reflection, and (c) resolving the confusion in a certain (if limited) fashion (or at least giving it some determinate form). Operating in this mode, one must remain resolutely attentive to both the veridictional and ethical stakes of the engagement: seeking to clarify the truth of the situation in order make determinations about its significance—however partial and fleeting.

Another mode of engagement is one that sidesteps the Deweyan labor of moving from lesser to greater determination by bracketing questions of truth and power. This mode seems to be at play in a collaborative engagement with neuroscientists and sociologists described by Fitzgerald and colleagues (not with Callard). In a recent paper Fitzgerald et al describe neuroscientific-sociological efforts to put to the test the neuroscientific endeavor to localize “valid acts of deception within the body and brain of an individual” (Fitzgerald et al 2014: 706), i.e. to determine the neurobiology of lie detection. They report that, in the end, this engagement proved to be an experiment in confirming something the sociologists already knew (but which was *not* the primary goal): viz. that “the experiment recapitulated biologically a point that we already knew historically” (713): neurobiological tests reproduce flawed assumptions in older biological lie detection tests.

What conclusions might one draw from the fact that neuroscientists are pursuing work whose flaws are already known by their sociological counterparts? How should this fact be made a part of the ethics of scientific engagement under the sign of collaboration? What could *collaborative* inquiry mean within such a setting?

Given the pervasive emphasis on “the politics of knowledge” in today’s academy the aims of collaborative inquiry might be programmatic: to participate in the work of helping to determine the kinds of questions that science within a particular domain and within a certain political economy can *and should* be asking. This, however, is not the direction that the Fitzgerald and his collaborators seem to espouse:

“we have pursued a transdisciplinary mode of intervention in which the neurobiological legibility of ‘truth’, for example, is not simply affirmed scientifically or criticized sociologically; instead, this legibility is expanded and complicated through more risky and generous imaginaries of cross-disciplinary connection” (Ibid: 714).

It is not clear what “expansion” and “complication” mean in this paragraph, though perhaps the terms are more fully explained elsewhere. A series of questions might nonetheless be posed: in what manner is the

neurobiological *legibility* of “truth” affirmed or denied? What can a sociologist learn from making such a judgment about legibility and how does she determine the veridictional norms of expansion and complication? And how is the question of the modes and forms of risky and generous truth-practice critically engaged as part constituting the terms of collaboration between the neuroscientists and the sociologists?

The fashion in which one would pursue an answer to these questions within the frame of collaboration would not be obvious under any conditions, but it becomes less clear under the conditions of ethical self-limitation proposed by Fitzgerald et al:

“Our proposal is that ... success might have come precisely because we did not speak frankly; we did not seek the truth; we totally failed to acknowledge – let alone discuss – the consequences of our experimental situation. What we did, instead, was to try to work and live within a zone that was just about ambiguous enough to keep everything together – that was sufficiently averse to frank-speaking to keep the worst of the resentments at bay” (Ibid: 716).

We worry that this determined self-limitation marks a troubling turn in the practice of truth and ethics (c.f. Stavrianakis, Bennett and Fearnley 2015), a moment whose defining feature is that those dedicating their lives to knowledge practices choose to eliminate from their repertoire of ethical and intellectual equipment exercises of critical self-formation that prepare one to take up truth-practices in the face of shifting power relations and the attendant need to speak frankly about both power and the truth as one finds it.

If one is willing to pay the price of such a double elimination (i.e. truth and ethics), then a certain playfulness might indeed become available. But such playfulness is unlikely to be constituted as the uninhibited and spontaneous activity of scientific curiosity. Rather, it is more likely to be a species of ethically deformative bureaucratic administration (or the incorporation of ‘artistic critique’ into management, as Eve Chiapello has described it). Such a species consists in managing the affective norms of a space (whatever you do, don’t get angry!), and minimizing practices of truth and mutual care.

A critical space evacuated of frank-speech becomes a bureaucratic discipline of just getting along. In view of the problem of collaboration, and the question of truth and ethics, we think it is worth returning to Robert Merton’s re-characterization of the dysfunctional aspects of Weber’s ideal-type of bureaucracy. Merton refers to Veblen’s concept of “trained

incapacities” (c.f. Rabinow and Bennett 2012: 80-90) and Dewey’s notion of “occupational psychosis” as hallmarks of deformative bureaucratic organization: “states of affairs in which one’s abilities” (such as the ability “to get along”, “to play the game” “to be part of the administration”) “function as blind spots” (Merton 1957: 252). They are blind spots insofar as reliable and successful bureaucracy requires an internalized feel for the limitation of one’s authority and competence relative to the regulated action one seeks.

Deformative bureaucratic organization, in other words, stunts the private use of reason, in Kant’s sense of the term. Collaboration animated in the spirit of such organization remains anti-political—and not in the scientific sense of seeking objectivity, but rather in the self-delimiting sense of turning away from the demands of the day. Science and politics, after all, both require the public use of reason.

Perhaps the confusion arising out of the play of subjectivity and subjection described by Fitzgerald and Callard is not primarily scientific but rather ethical (“not being clear on what I am doing/who I am/what am I getting out this collaboration”), given that (at least in the case of the paper cited) Fitzgerald et al. don’t report learning anything new. If so, then it seems fair to ask: as scholars concerned with inquiring into, and critically appraising biology and medicine, what is the worth and what are the costs of being playful in situations of blocked veridictional possibility?

Perhaps the joys of ethical confusion arise out of a state of equilibrium in which the tensions of disagreement and agonistic critique are released through an internalized resolve to bite one’s tongue and therewith through the pleasure of being allowed participate in an experiment with powerful actors: an experiment in sustaining adjacency to power. But what would and should the critical hallmarks of such adjacency consist in if one indeed does need to confront questions of justice and the mutuality of desire? Can engagement with powerful actors be judged successful if it risks becoming an exercise in the maintenance of rapport?

It bears underscoring that we agree that *scientific* collaboration thrives in situations of uninhibited creative engagement and production. It thrives in situations where something like intellectual play is actively pursued, made possible, and has even become a norm of engagement. But as we have written elsewhere (Rabinow and Bennett 2012; Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2013; 2014), that play, in our view, requires undertaking the difficult and sometimes uncomfortable labor of cultivating a disposition of agonistic friendliness and a care for undertaking scientific practice together, with the accompanying questions of truth and ethics that such cultivation and practice require.

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