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Evidence from Research with Human Participants
Summary of the Final Report of QTD Working Group II.2

Anastasia Shesterinina, Mark A. Pollack, and Leonardo R. Arriola[*]

1. Scope of Report

This document summarizes the Community Transparency Statement of Working Group II.2: Evidence from Researcher Interactions with Human Participants. We examine how transparency is understood by scholars who regularly engage with human subjects; assess the benefits and costs of transparency practices; and present practical recommendations for researchers, editors, reviewers, and funders. Our findings draw on contributions posted to the Qualitative Transparency Deliberations (QTD) online forum, offline consultations with scholars from across the discipline, and related published materials.

We find broad support for the principle of transparency among scholars working with human research participants, but our consultations also make clear that the meaning of transparency should be understood as part of research integrity writ large. The scholars we consulted were nearly unanimous in emphasizing the importance of openness and explicitness – e.g., by specifying how information from human subjects research is collected and analyzed or interpreted – for the integrity of the research enterprise. Transparency requirements must be weighed against the ethical obligation to protect human subjects, the epistemological diversity within the discipline, and the workload imposed on researchers using qualitative data.

2. Forms and Benefits of Research Transparency

Working Group II.2 examined how transparency is understood by scholars in terms of data access, production transparency, and analytic transparency.

Production Transparency: Accurately reporting the process by which evidentiary material is generated remains a core aspect of transparency across research traditions. Many of the scholars consulted expressed support for this aspect of transparency, provided that it is interpreted broadly to mean that scholars report on research processes (e.g., identification and recruitment of participants, where this information does not compromise the security of their subjects), as well as reporting scholar reflexivity and ethical dilemmas.

Analytic Transparency: Political scientists generally support analytic transparency, namely, providing a clear account of how conclusions are drawn from data. Scholars see such analytic transparency as enabling better assessments of evidence from different research traditions and as guarding against bias. The benefits of facilitating replication and discouraging dishonesty are also acknowledged, but considered of secondary importance and applicable to some and not other research traditions. Accordingly, many argue for recognizing that the most appropriate way to *document* analytic processes is often specific to particular epistemic communities.

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[*] Anastasia Shesterinina <a.shesterinina@sheffield.ac.uk> is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Politics/International Politics at the University of Sheffield. Mark A. Pollack <mark.pollack@temple.edu> is a Professor of Political Science and Law, Jean Monnet Chair, and Director of Global Studies at Temple University. Leonardo R. Arriola <larriola@berkeley.edu> is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for African Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

Data Access: Transparency discussions largely focus on making data available for evaluation or replication. Scholars working with human subjects, however, need a more flexible conceptualization that recognizes epistemological diversity and ethical imperatives. Rather than submitting interview transcripts or field notes, scholars could provide extended excerpts or detailed description of procedures used to collect and analyze data (see production and analytic transparency above), where ethically appropriate. The primary benefit of an expanded notion of data access would be to make findings from different approaches understandable to a broader research community. Some scholars also recognize benefits from facilitating replication and preventing dishonesty, but there is considerable disagreement regarding such outcomes.

3. Costs, Risks, and Limitations

Working Group II.2 deliberations identified five areas of concern: human subject protection, access to human subjects, effort and time, power differentials, and epistemological diversity.

Human Subjects Protection: Researchers are primarily concerned by the potential dangers that transparency requirements can pose to human research participants. The sharing of anonymized or partially redacted interview transcripts or field notes could result in the unintentional violation of confidentiality. Descriptions of sampling techniques or characterizations of the pool of interviewees could also inadvertently reveal individual identities. Such concerns are most acute for researchers working among vulnerable populations, including ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, citizens of authoritarian regimes, and those living in conflict zones.

Access to Human Subjects: Excessive transparency requirements might undermine the trust established with research participants, and endanger future access to populations of all types who might perceive a weakening of confidentiality. This concern was expressed with respect to requirements to grant access to interview transcripts or field notes as a condition of publication or funding support. Requiring the sharing of such documentation could also unintentionally introduce bias by driving away potential participants willing to express unpopular or unofficial positions.

Effort, Time, and Resources: Providing access to detailed accounts of how human subjects data are generated and analyzed may impose undue costs. Preparing and assembling qualitative appendices may produce a burdensome level of work not required of scholars using other methods without the participation of human subjects.

Exacerbating Power Differentials: Labor-intensive transparency requirements may fall most heavily on less established scholars or researchers at underfunded institutions, placing them at a disadvantage when publishing. A related concern involves the scholar's intellectual property. The common requirement that underlying data be publicly shared within one year may be insufficient to allow scholars to make full use of data collected through time-intensive fieldwork.

Transparency Standards and Diversity: Editorial insistence on transparency may limit diversity in the discipline by holding qualitative researchers to a different standard and thus marginalizing researchers working in epistemological and ontological traditions incompatible with codified transparency standards.

4. Recommendations

Working Group II.2 identified a number of practices for researchers to achieve meaningful transparency. We highlight here a few choice examples from the broader range of available tools. These tools, however, should only be used or requested when ethically, epistemologically, and practically appropriate on a case-by-case basis.

In-article transparency discussion: The most obvious way to be transparent about research is to explain the process of gathering empirical information and the analytical process in detail.

Footnotes: Footnotes should be used to provide essential additional information on methodology, including data collection, and to support analytical claims.

Transparency appendices: Online appendices provide space to expand on methodology, fieldwork logistics, interview protocols or excerpts, and analysis procedures.

Discussion of reflexivity: Researchers can enhance transparency by explicitly discussing how their position vis-à-vis research participants affected the process of collecting and analyzing or interpreting data.

Active citation and innovations for data collection: Hyperlinked citations and innovations in data collection, such as video collections, provide new ways for sharing data if implemented with attention to human subjects and copyright concerns.