13 Public Sector Transparency

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Transparency in the Limelight

Attention to government transparency has increased greatly in the past 15 years. For instance, US president Barack Obama[1] stated, 'We're not going to change America unless we change the culture that has dominated Washington for far too long. And that means shining a bright light on how Washington works.' Subsequently, the Open Government Directive, which President Barack Obama issued in 2009, has highlighted the importance of transparency for policy makers, politicians, and scholars. Institutional transparency has gained 'quasi-religious significance' (Hood 2006), and has become a key feature in modern governance (Erkkilä 2012; Etzioni 2010; Keane 2009). Moreover, transparency is seen as a way to increase trust in government (Grimmelikhuijsen 2012; Porumbescu 2015a), state legitimacy (De Fine Licht 2011), citizen participation (Porumbescu 2015b), and to reduce corruption (Bauhr and Grimes 2014).

Two societal developments have contributed to the strong appeal of transparency nowadays. First, the rise of the Internet and communication technologies has greatly increased the amount of government information accessible to the public (Meijer 2009). The information technology revolution and the consequential vast increase in the amount of information stored and gathered by government have also increased the importance of transparency: if more information can be stored, there is more potential for disclosure and increased transparency. This partly coincides with a second development: the rise of New Public Management (NPM) as way of organising governments (Hood 1991). Public sector reforms inspired by NPM urge a greater degree of transparency of government services and activities, with the idea that

[1] Barack Obama, speech in New Hampshire, 4 September 2007.

increased visibility of how these services operate will improve their performance. In addition, it is commonly agreed that a certain extent of transparency is essential for democratic accountability to flourish: without information about political or administrative decision making, it is impossible to keep officeholders to account (Florini 2007; Roberts 2006).

These developments have given government transparency a heightened relevance; and with its increased technological and administrative possibilities, transparency has been looked to by many as a panacea for better governance. But what is transparency? The term is often used in different ways by different people (Meijer 2009). Transparency in this chapter is defined generally as 'the extent to which a (public) organisation allows external actors to monitor and assess its internal workings and performance' (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2014: 139). Note that this is a fairly broad definition, including both procedural – visibility of decision-making procedures, for instance – and outcome elements – visibility of the effects of certain policies and actions. One specific aspect of transparency is the growth of public reporting of public organisations and public services' performance. Experimental work on this topic is covered in Chapters 11 and 12.

In this chapter we will focus on two foci in transparency research: the causes of transparency and the effects of transparency. Scholars looking for the determinants of government transparency look at this question from either an institutional perspective or a micro-level perspective. The first type of research looks more broadly at, for instance, the strength of Freedom of Information (FOI) laws or website information. The second type of research looks at whether particular information and how information is disclosed by asking: what are the effects of government transparency? Research addressing this question empirically studies the normative claims surrounding government transparency. These normative claims are twofold. On one hand, there is the idea that transparency will discipline public officials: if behaviour is out in the open, there will be more 'good' behaviour (less corruption, more efficiency, better performance). On the other hand, there is the idea that citizens or other external stakeholders use government information and process it properly, which then results in more positive perceptions of government (e.g., trust, satisfaction, legitimacy).

We will review experimental and non-experimental research on government transparency broadly addressing these two questions. We will assess what experimental work has contributed to the academic debate on transparency and remaining lacunae.

Non-experimental Research on Transparency

We will first focus on what we can learn from non-experimental research on the two key research questions mentioned earlier. Next, we will briefly discuss the limitations of this kind of research.

Politicians, some interest groups, and scholars have been strong promoters of the idea of shedding 'sunlight' on government organisations in order to reduce corruption, enhance performance, and restore or strengthen citizen trust in government (Florini 2007; Meijer 2009). According to Hood and Heald (2006), transparency has even acquired a 'quasi-religious status' and it has become suspect to oppose calls for increased transparency. Therefore, transparency has become an important part of the political vocabulary (Coglianese 2009). Arguments for secrecy in public affairs are still made by some, yet usually for particular – and exceptional – circumstances, mainly related to security issues (Roberts 2006).

Nevertheless, there are critics of increased government transparency. First, scholars argue that although transparency leads to a great deal of available information, this does not necessarily result in increased levels of trust. Indeed, O'Neill (2002: 77) argues that transparency may even erode trust. She states that the Internet makes it possible to disclose a great deal of information, which not only leads to a cascade of information, but also to a flood of misinformation. Furthermore, public officials could 'massage' or 'spin' the messages. Second, transparency pessimists stress that increased transparency could lead to increased and unjustified blaming of government (e.g., Worthy 2010: 575–6). A third 'dark side' of transparency might be that when people can see everything behind the scenes of government, they may become disenchanted with it. Governing is often a messy and uncertain activity, and exposing this may erode citizen trust and legitimacy of government operations.

This normative debate has sparked a string of empirical studies that have attempted to find evidence for the various alleged effects of government transparency. To begin with, we will review some studies that looked at the causes/determinants of transparency; next, we look at studies regarding the effects of transparency.

In the wake of the desirable connotation of transparency, scholars have tried to pin down what its potential drivers are. Mostly quantitative studies have focused on explaining variation in transparency statistics across countries (e.g., Pina et al. 2007; Relly and Sabwarhal 2009; Welch and Wong 2001) or between local governments (Cucciniello and Nasi 2014; Grimmelikhuijsen and Welch 2012). Furthermore, qualitative case studies have provided an in-depth investigation of what shapes transparency (Grimmelikhuijsen and Kasymova 2015; Meijer 2013; Zyl 2014). Case study research by Zyl (2014), for example, emphasises the importance of external stakeholders as intermediaries and as a lever to further improve transparency. In addition, Meijer (2013) provides case studies that show how changes in transparency regimes link with broader societal developments. These findings highlight that a combination of government capacity and external pressures are important in determining the degree of transparency.

With regard to research on the effects of transparency – most studies assess the relation between transparency and outcomes such as trust, legitimacy, and participation. Campbell (2003) argues that one cause of the lack of trust in government is that citizens are not provided with factual documentation about government processes and performance. In this sense, disclosing information about government activities is crucial to increasing citizen trust. Overall, results suggest that there are moderately positive effects of transparency on trust and other perceptions of government. Using survey data, Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) found a significant relationship between trust and website transparency. Likewise, Porumbescu (2015a) found neutral to positive correlations between (electronic) transparency and perceptions of government trustworthiness. Welch and colleagues (2005), using survey data from the Council of Excellence in Government, studied whether there was a correlation between transparency satisfaction, e-government satisfaction, and trust. No direct relation between transparency and trust in government was found. However, results showed a weak but significant correlation between transparency satisfaction and e-government satisfaction. In contrast, Worthy (2010) found mixed results. He analysed the impact of the rather recent enactment of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in the United Kingdom, but concludes that although FOI has increased transparency and accountability, it did not result in increased participation or improved trust in government.

Furthermore, there have been studies of the link between transparency and (reduced) corruption. Bauhr and Grimes (2014) analysed data from the World Values Survey. Their empirical analyses appear to confirm that a gain in transparency in highly corrupt countries tends to increase the chances that corrupt regimes will resign. Contrary to this, a comparative study by Lindstedt and Naurin (2010) shows that transparency (the availability of information on rulers' behaviour) is not enough to combat corruption.

Overall, non-experimental work has provided valuable insights about the determinants and effects of transparency. With regard to determinants of transparency, a combination of survey and qualitative research has shown that external pressure is needed to create transparency, such as from the media or other major stakeholders. Furthermore, sufficient budget and personnel are also needed for a government to become more transparent. Research on the effects of transparency has found relatively optimistic results regarding its effect on trust, legitimacy, and corruption.

However, some lacunas can be identified due to the nature of the research methodologies used in non-experimental work on transparency. First, there is the obvious concern of endogeneity associated with cross-sectional, observational research. For instance, the finding that external pressure is important to create a lever for increased transparency may be prone to reverse causality. Instead of creating more transparency, a more transparent government could already be more open and cause stronger external pressure groups.

In research on transparency as the cause of an effect, this concern is probably even stronger. Citizens with higher trust, for instance, may also perceive government as more transparent. Similarly, it is highly likely that societies with higher rates of corruption will automatically be less transparent. Cause and effect are hard to separate.

In the next section we will discuss how experimental work in the area of transparency has dealt with these issues.

Experimental Designs and Findings on Transparency

We found 11 papers investigating transparency using an experimental design. Of these 11, 7 are based on a survey/vignette experiment. Four papers use a field experiment. Only one paper focuses on the antecedents of transparency and 10 on the effects. Next, we will discuss laboratory and survey experiments, followed by field and natural experiments. For each experiment, we discuss the research topic, the design, and the results.

Laboratory and Survey Experiments

We found seven experiments in this category. Most experiments focus on the effects of transparency in various contexts. First, Grimmelikhuijsen and colleagues have carried out a series of experiments on the effects of various dimensions of transparency on trust in government. In a similar vein, De Fine Licht looked at various policies to assess the effect of various degrees of transparency on perceived legitimacy.

To answer the question of whether balanced government information has different effects on citizen trust in government than do politically *spun* messages, Grimmelikhuijsen (2011) used an online experiment with a between-subjects design. Spinning is operationalised as the degree of positivity of the message content. Undergraduate students (N = 60) were asked to visit a fictitious municipality website that contained information on a municipal air pollution policy in three different levels of 'spin'. The treatments (level of 'spin') consisted of a balanced message, a slightly positive message, and a very positive message on the air pollution policy. After viewing the different websites, the subjects filled out a questionnaire asking about trust, which was operationalised as perceived benevolence, competence, and honesty. The results indicate that, indeed, there is some effect of message 'spin' on benevolence, competence, and honesty together. However, a balanced message on a government website will lead to negative evaluations of competence. Further, the results suggest that less 'spin' does not affect the honesty and benevolence of a government organisation.

In a larger online experiment on the link between transparency, knowledge, and trust, Grimmelikhuijsen (2012) tested two rival hypotheses (N = 658) (between-subjects design). One proposition predicts the link between citizen knowledge and trust whereas the second one argues that more or less subconscious and affective cues (such as the general image people have of the government) are relevant. In this experiment, a voluntary sample of citizens was asked to visit one of four government mock-up websites with varying degrees of government transparency as well as varying message contents. Again the case of air pollution in the municipality was used, and a posttest questionnaire measured trust in government. The results provide mixed evidence of the two rivaling hypotheses. The results indicate that the link between transparency and trust in a government organisation is determined by a mix of knowledge and feelings and that the overall effect of transparency is limited. Preexisting ideas about what government does and whether it is benign are far more determining than a single experience with a government organisation. A takeaway from this article is that knowledge about performance outcomes is only part of the link between transparency and trust, and that more realistic views about transparency's effects should be developed.

Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2014) employed an experiment to develop a more specific expectation of the relation between transparency and trust, looking at how different types of citizens respond to various degrees of transparency. The participants were assigned randomly to one of three conditions: In a 'high transparency' condition, subjects were informed timely and comprehensibly on air pollution policy outcomes of their municipality. Timeliness is operationalised as the amount of time between the actual measurement or determination of the policy outcome and the disclosure of the data (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2014: 141). Comprehensibility is regarded as the simplicity and clarity of the disclosed information. In a 'low transparency' condition, the subjects were not informed timely and comprehensibility was low. In a control condition, participants read some general information about the city government. After reading the information subjects filled out a posttest questionnaire with measurements of trust, predisposition to trust government, knowledge, and demographic variables.

In this study, Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer showed there is a limited effect of transparency on trust, but they fleshed out the transparency–trust link further by testing two moderating effects: predisposition to trust and knowledge. The results indeed show that general predisposition to trust government and prior knowledge (issue specific) moderate the relation between transparency and trust. More knowledge makes citizens less likely to change their trust, whereas citizens with a high predisposition do not increase their trust because their trust is high already.

In an effort to compare effects of transparency on trust across nations, a series of three experiments with university students (N = 660) in South Korea and the Netherlands was carried out by Grimmelikhuijsen and colleagues (2013). A national culture may influence how people think and act; the relationship between transparency and trust may also be affected.

The three experiments each used a different operationalisation/ manipulation of transparency, namely, completeness, colour, and usability. Completeness refers to whether the information is disclosed fully (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013: 576). Colour is thought of as the degree of positiveness of the information. Finally, one experiment used usability of information, which is conceived as the comprehensibility of the information disclosed. A remarkable result is that the experiments in South Korea yielded negative effects on trust in government, whereas this was hardly the case in the Netherlands. While many factors could influence this effect, one tentative explanation proffered by the authors are the differences in cultural values in both countries.

Building on Hofstede's work on cultural values (2001), the authors theorise that the differences in effect sizes might be explained as a result of the differences in power distance. Power distance is thought of as the extent to which power inequalities in society are accepted and seen as normal. Power distance is one of the cultural dimensions of Hofstede that is much higher in South Korea than in the Netherlands. Government transparency is supposed to reduce information asymmetry between the 'rulers' and the 'ruled', and as such it mitigates power distance. In a country where power distance is high, transparency may go against this cultural value.

In 2011, De Fine Licht employed a survey experiment (N = 210) that provided counterintuitive evidence that transparency of decision-making processes does not necessarily lead to more perceived legitimacy. De Fine Licht designed a refined experiment in which participants (a heterogeneous sample of citizens) were presented with a description of priority setting between two groups with different health care needs. She used seven experimental groups to test two types of manipulations. Next to one control group, six groups were presented with different descriptions of the decision-making procedure, including decision making through representation, direct participation, and expert decision making. In addition, to also gauge the effect of media framing, a second manipulation framed the decision-making procedure in positive or negative terms. De Fine Licht demonstrates that transparent decision-making procedures tend to weaken rather than strengthen general legitimacy of decision making in health care. Another interesting contribution of this experiment was that while the form of decision making seemed to have no significant impact on perceived legitimacy, the framing of a decision-making procedure did influence public perceptions.

Later, De Fine Licht (2014) built on this experiment, adding various conditions and nuances. She tested the effect of different policy areas as a moderator on transparency effects in a large online experiment (N = 1,032). De Fine Licht uses the psychological concept of 'taboo trade-offs' (Tetlock et al. 2000) to show how citizens respond more sceptically to government decision-making transparency in areas that relate to human life and death, compared with less controversial areas. According to this theory, human life and well-being are considered 'sacred' and cannot be traded off against 'secular' values, such as money. Government transparency can expose decision making of these trade-offs. This was tested by including one area with taboo trade-offs – traffic security – and one area without taboo trade-offs – culture and leisure – in an experimental setting. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these two policy areas and to one of three conditions of transparency: no transparency, transparency in rationale, and transparency in process. Participants who were exposed to decision making about a taboo trade-off, such as traffic security, perceived the decision maker as less legitimate than non-taboo decisions (such as about parks and recreation). It illustrates that transparent government decisions about such trade-offs will therefore encounter much more resistance than trade-offs that do not violate this taboo.

Furthermore, De Fine Licht and colleagues (2014) employed a vignette experiment related to the same question (N = 400). High school students (aged 17–19) were asked to read a piece of text and answer questions. The text contained scenarios in which 'new rules of conduct for the school were to be decided' (De Fine Licht et al. 2014: 119). Two issues were central to this code of conduct: 1) the use of mobile phones in classrooms and 2) the possibility to make formal complaints against teachers. There were five manipulations of transparency: 1) no transparency, 2) transparency in rationale (justifying a decision in retrospect), 3) transparency in process (opportunity), 4) transparency in process (exposing bargaining), and 5) transparency in process (exposing deliberation). The students answered questions about legitimacy in a posttest questionnaire. Results indicated that indeed transparency may lead to improved legitimacy, particularly in the transparency in rationale condition, but not in the process conditions of transparency. Hence, this experiment showed that it might be better not to expose too much information about the decision-making process when it regards legitimacy.

Field Experiments

Four experiments in this category were found mostly looking into the effects of transparency.

To answer the question of whether the Right to Information Act (RTIA) can be used to obtain greater access to basic public goods that are otherwise attainable through bribery, Peisakhin and Pinto (2010) employed a field experiment on access to ration cards among New Delhi's slum dwellers. The RTIA mandates that all government institutions must take the necessary steps to enable information disclosure and thus transparency. The idea is that greater availability of information will result in a drop in corruption. In their experiment, they asked slum dwellers (N = 86) to apply for ration cards, randomly assigning them to one of the three treatment groups (RTIA request, support letter from a local NGO, and bribing a middleman) or the control group (using the standard application procedure). All ration card applications were filed at a local office responsible for an area. Applicants randomised into the RTIA group filed a request for information under the Act shortly after submitting their ration card application. In their RTIA request, the slum dwellers asked for information about the status of their applications and the average processing time for ration card applications in this district. Applicants in the NGO experimental group submitted a letter of support from a local NGO with their ration card application. This letter showed that the applicant was eligible for a ration card and urged prompt administrative action. Applicants in the bribe money group submitted their applications to a middleman active at the office rather than leaving it directly with the officials. The middleman requested a bribe with each application. Their findings demonstrate that 94 per cent of the individuals in the RTIA and bribery groups received their ration cards within one year, as opposed to 21 per cent in NGO and control conditions. Median processing time was 82 days for the bribery group, 120 days for the RTIA group, and 343 days for the NGO and control groups. While the RTIA is not as effective as bribery, it is considerably more effective than the standard application procedures or reliance on NGO support. These findings indicate that greater transparency can reduce the need for bribery and corruption.

In a similar experiment, Peisakhin (2012) tests how effective RTIA is in comparison to bribery for both slum dwellers and middle-class individuals in India as they apply for basic public services. Slum dwellers (N = 61) and middle-class individuals (N = 60) were asked to apply for a registration to vote. Individuals were randomly assigned to one of the two treatment conditions: RTIA or bribery and a standard procedure. Like in the previous experiment, the RTIA group was asked to file a RTIA request shortly after submitting paperwork to register to vote. The RTIA asked about the status of the individual's application and the average waiting time to be added to the electoral roll in the district. The bribe intervention consisted of an illicit payment submitted with an individual's electoral roll application. The amount paid was based on interviews with middlemen. The control group submitted its applications in accordance with the standard procedure. Applications in all groups were staggered so that government officials would not suspect the research study. Applications in the RTIA and bribe groups did very well compared to the control group; however, the only group with a 100 per cent success rate was the bribe group. While bribing is still the most effective intervention, the RTIA still halves standard processing times.

Grimmelikhuijsen and Klijn (2015) investigated to what extent transparency affects trust in judges and asked: how is this effect related to individual predispositions to trust and knowledge? To investigate this question, the study used a field experiment and consisted of two groups that both completed a pretest and a posttest. The treatment group received the instruction to watch a nationally broadcasted TV series about judges (n = 585) and a control group did not receive such an instruction (n = 464). The television series consisted of eight episodes and in each episode several judges were televised in different types of cases to present different realms of the judicial practice. In addition to informing the public about the actual work of judges, the episodes clearly express the symbols and values of the judiciary. Looking at the effect of the series on the overall sample, the authors carried out an instrumental variables analysis and found a main effect of the number of shows watched on trust in judges. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that it has the strongest effect on people with medium prior knowledge about the judiciary. However, they also found that a higher predisposition to trust mitigated the effect of transparency, potentially because of a ceiling effect.

Cuillier (2010) conducted an experiment about access to government information, focusing on the effect of persuasion tactics to obtain information through Freedom of Information requests. He used a basic randomised posttest-only design. Cuillier reports on two experimental studies. In the first experiment, a journalist requested use-of-force reports from all police agencies in a state, mailing agencies either friendly (N = 53) or threatening (N = 53) letters, randomly assigned. In the second experiment, a journalist requested superintendent contacts from school districts (N = 219), mailing agencies friendly, threatening, or neutral letters (all groups N = 73). The threatening letter ends with a threat of litigation for noncompliance. The friendly letter was created by incorporating elements that foster liking, such as subordinating language and sincere compliments. In this letter, the public records law and threat of litigation for noncompliance were not mentioned. The letters were identical, except for changes in wording and tone – the experimental manipulation. In both experiments, a control group was not possible because there is no standard request letter in which one can compare different wording. When needed, a third letter was sent after four weeks. In both experiments, the threatening letter resulted in slightly higher response rates, lower copy fees, and faster response times; however, the friendly letters resulted in more helpfulness.

Implications

What have these experiments shown so far? Table 13.1 provides an overview of main experimental findings and how they match with previously existing assumptions from observational studies.

The general pattern is that experimental findings tend to nuance and contextualise non-experimental findings. As such, they contribute to further specification of theory formation about transparency and have proven to be an important complementary methodology for transparency research.

Table 13.1: *Overview of experiments of transparency*

Topic	Main findings	Implications for theory
Five experiments on effect of transparency on trust Type: Online survey and one field	Transparency has subdued and sometimes negative effect on citizen trust in government. Effect depends on the type of citizen; preexisting images, predisposition, and knowledge moderate the effect of transparency on trust. There may vast be cross-national differences in how government transparency is valued.	*Expectation from observational studies:* Indicate linear positive relation between transparency and trust. *Experimental findings:* Effect of transparency is highly contingent and depends on how different types of citizens process information differently.
Three experiments on effects of transparency on legitimacy Type: Survey	Decision-making transparency has subdued and sometimes negative effect on perceived legitimacy. Media framing matters and also the policy area is a contextual factor that affects how transparency affects perceived legitimacy of decision making.	*Expectation from observational studies:* Indicate linear positive relation between transparency and legitimacy. *Experimental findings:* The effect of transparency is highly contingent and depends on how the type of policy area and how it is framed by the media.

Table 13.1: (*cont.*)

Topic	Main findings	Implications for theory
Two experiments on effectiveness of transparency in corrupt regimes Type: Field	Using transparency in application for social services in corrupt regimes can be a way to limit corruption.	*Expectation from observational studies:* Transparency reduces corruption. *Experimental findings:* Transparency forces services delivery without bribery and thus indeed has potential to reduce the need for bribery.
One experiment on determinants of transparency Type: Field	Approaching government organisations more aggressively leads to more forthcoming information disclosure.	*Expectation from observational studies:* Various determinants are mentioned, mostly institutional. *Experimental findings:* Add to literature that certain micro-level determinants can also improve transparency.

First, it is evident that the experimental evidence shows that transparency does not lead to positive effects by definition. In the political realm and popular press, transparency is often lauded. Surveys also often point out that there are moderately positive effects of transparency on various perceptual outcomes. However, there is the obvious concern of endogeneity associated with cross-sectional research. For instance, reverse causality can play a major role. In a governmental organisation where there is a great deal of corruption, there will probably not be very much transparency. Hence, corruption and transparency are related, but corruption may be the *cause* of low transparency, not the *effect*. Experimental research is uniquely suited to separate cause and effect. The experimental studies reviewed earlier show that transparency does not always lead to 'positive' effects. Sometimes, there are no effects. For instance, in their study on transparency and trust across nations, Grimmelikhuijsen and colleagues (2013) found no significant differences between high transparency (complete information provided) and the control group on trust for the Dutch student sample. In other experiments, even negative effects of transparency were found (e.g., De Fine Licht 2011).

Second – and highly related to the previous point – experimental studies can be beneficial in teasing out what type of transparency has which kind of effects. Transparency is a very broad concept and it can be comprised of various dimensions of information, such as understandable information, timely information, and usable information. Further, the object of transparency can vary, such as decision making or performance. Randomised experiments are especially suited to specifically test what type of transparency has what type of effects. For instance, various conditions can be created, such as providing transparency about the decision-making process or only about the outcome of this process. For instance, De Fine Licht and colleagues (2014) differentiate in their experiment between transparency in rationale, transparency in process (opportunity), transparency in process (bargaining), and transparency in process (deliberation). She also includes the control condition 'no transparency'. She shows that transparency in rationale improves procedure acceptance more than process transparency or not being transparent at all.

Third, experiments can provide insights on the boundary conditions regarding the effects of transparency. Hence, the antecedents and effects of transparency are highly dependent on the particular context.

For instance, Grimmelikhuijsen and colleagues (2013) show that transparency increases trust in certain countries, while not in others. Furthermore, De Fine Licht (2014) provides experimental evidence that that transparency is less effective in sensitive policy areas that involve trade-offs of human life (traffic security) as compared to more 'mundane' policy areas (like leisure and culture). Also Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2014) show how different types of citizens are affected differently by transparency.

Challenges and Suggestions for Future Experimental Research

Overall, this chapter showed that the number of experiments conducted in the area of transparency is still limited and – given the important empirical and theoretical contributions of experimental work on transparency – more systematic experimental evidence on the effects and causes of transparency is necessary. Based on this general premise, we offer four conclusions and subsequent recommendations for future experimental research:

1. There is much more experimental research on the effects of transparency than on the determinants of transparency. Future experimental work could look into the determinants of public sector transparency.
2. Survey experiments are predominant in testing the effects of transparency. We recommend scholars use a greater diversity of experimental types, such as field experiments and laboratory experiments.
3. There are many other normative claims still understudied by experiments, such as the effect transparency on participation and voice behavior by citizens, or the effect of transparency on the behavior of civil servants. Experiments are useful to investigate causal relationships for these assumed relations as well.
4. Experiments have shown the contingency of transparency effects; we should further and more systematically explore the contextual and boundary conditions that are relevant for the effects of transparency.

These recommendations are further explained next. We would like to see more diversity in the type of experiments. First, it is important to carry out more field experiments as a means of establishing the external validity of key findings on one hand, but also more lab experiments to very rigorously determine internal validity of findings. As noted previously, some field experiments on transparency issues have been done. One looked at how using persuasion tactics influenced the compliance of government bodies to FOI requests, which thus looks at which determinants foster transparency. The two other field experiments we found viewed transparency as the independent variable, with trust (Grimmelikhuijsen and Klijn 2015) and social benefits (Peishakin 2012) as dependent variables. These field experiments show a more optimistic picture of the effect of transparency than many of the lab and survey experiments. Whereas survey experiments have nuanced the overly optimistic view of the potential of transparency, field experiments show that transparency has a positive effect on judicial legitimacy and handing out of social benefits to disadvantaged groups in society. The question remains of whether these more positive findings in field experiments are due to the context-sensitivity of transparency or are artefacts of the type of experiment. Currently, the number of experiments is limited and there are no replications of survey experiments in the field, so there is no answer to this question as of yet. The first recommendation therefore is to replicate survey experiments, which are more common in transparency research, as field experiments. For instance, researchers could collaborate with local government to vary the degree of dimensions of transparency when informing citizens about policy projects. This would need to address various ethical considerations, but would be a highly interesting way to assess the effects of transparency in the field instead of in survey experiments.

Furthermore, the absence of laboratory experiments is striking. We envision that artificial lab settings are suitable to determine the effect of transparency on behavioural elements, for instance, one alleged negative effect of government transparency on decision makers (e.g. Bannister and Connolly 2011). A computerised laboratory experiment could help to determine whether decision makers indeed behave differently under transparent conditions.

Our second recommendation is for more work to be done on the causes or determinants of transparency. We found 11 experimental studies focused on the effects of transparency, but little work on the determinants of transparency. Of course, determinants are often sought and found in the institutional environment of governments (e.g., Relly and Sabharwal 2009). Still, the dearth of experimental research in this area limits our ability to answer key causal questions about how to promote transparency. It may not be possible or feasible to manipulate institutional factors experimentally at the macro level; however, other factors may be manipulated experimentally. For instance, lack of organisational support and perceived risk have been identified as a barrier to government transparency (Wirtz et al. 2015). In a bold field experimental setting, leadership support can be manipulated. For instance, public managers or leaders can be randomly assigned to receive training and instruction about the value of openness (and then compared to a control group without such training or instruction). Next the level of transparency can be monitored by, for instance, looking at proactive information provision on websites or by responsiveness to FOI requests.

Our third suggestion is to focus more effort on substantive areas that so far have received less experimental attention. For example, there have been a series of experimental studies in the area of citizen trust and legitimacy. However, there are other normative claims, for example, transparency as a means to increase citizen participation and citizen voice (e.g., Porumbescu 2015b). Also, experiments have predominantly focused on its effects on citizens, whereas there are potentially important effects on public sector organisations, their managers, or professionals. For example, transparency could enhance government performance or affect decision making of managers. The debate about whether transparency positively or negatively affects performance and decision making can be of much interest in the field of public management (Bannister and Connolly 2011), potentially with lab experiments such as mentioned before.

Our fourth recommendation is to experiment across various policy areas and types of transparency. Experimentation in two different policy areas has shown that the effect of transparency is context-bound (e.g., De Fine Licht et al. 2014). However, the contextual conditions have not yet been explored in a systematic manner. The context could consist of policy area, such as suggested by De Fine Licht (2014), implying that we can extend experimentation to underexplored areas such as education, safety, and health care.

Furthermore, various types of transparency have not been systematically tested. For instance, transparency can regard procedural elements, such as how decisions have been made (De Fine Licht 2011); yet it can also concern policy outcomes (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2014). Both types of transparency have a different nature and yield different effects. Hence, we propose two potential lines of varying the contextual conditions of transparency: extending the policy domain and extending to various types of transparency.

Finally, note that experimentation has its limits in terms of what it can test as transparency is interwoven with its institutional context, and as such considerable attention should be paid to 'macro-level' dynamics (Meijer, 't Hart, and Worthy 2015). Experimental research is not very suitable to assess transparency at this level. Therefore, in the pursuit of empirical evidence, a balanced approach is needed: macro-level work to assert how transparency is embedded in its institutional environment (e.g., Erkkilä 2012; Grimmelikhuijsen and Kasymova 2015; Meijer 2013; Piotrowski 2008) and micro-level research to assess transparency effects on individuals. That being said, even though the number of experimental studies on public sector transparency is small, this chapter shows how these studies have already improved our understanding of the effects of transparency tremendously.

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