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Article:

Jacobs, A.M., Büthe, T., Arjona, A. et al. (47 more authors) (2021) The qualitative transparency deliberations: insights and implications. *Perspectives on Politics*, 19 (1). pp. 171-208. ISSN 1537-5927

<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1537592720001164>

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Transparency in Qualitative Research: An Overview of Key Findings and Recommendations

Alan M. Jacobs and Tim Büthe

with Ana Arjona, Leonardo Arriola, Eva Bellin, Andrew Bennett, Lisa Björkman, Erik Bleich, Zachary Elkins, Tasha Fairfield, Nikhar Gaikwad, Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Mary Hawkesworth, Veronica Herrera, Yoshiko Herrera, Kimberley S. Johnson, Ekrem Karakoç, Kendra Koivu, Marcus Kreuzer, Milli Lake, Timothy Luke, Lauren MacLean, Samantha Majic, Rahsaan Maxwell, Zachariah Mampilly, Robert Mickey, Kimberly J. Morgan, Sarah E. Parkinson, Craig Parsons, Wendy Pearlman, Mark Pollack, Elliot Posner, Rachel Beatty Riedl, Edward Schatz, Carsten Q. Schneider, Jillian Schwedler, Anastasia Shesterinina, Erica Simmons, Diane Singerman, Hillel David Soifer, Nicholas Rush Smith, Scott Spitzer, Jonas Tallberg, Susan Thomson, Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, Barbara Vis, Lisa Wedeen, Juliet Williams, Elisabeth Jean Wood, and Deborah J. Yashar¹

February 2020

Introduction to Working Paper Series:
Qualitative Transparency Deliberations, Working Group Final Reports

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Marcus Kreuzer, Professor, Villanova University

Craig Parsons, Professor, University of Oregon

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I.1b Epistemological and Ontological Priors: Explicating the Perils of Transparency

Mary Hawkesworth, Professor, Rutgers University

Timothy W. Luke, Professor, Virginia Tech

Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, Associate Professor, Rutgers University-Newark

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I.2 Research Ethics and Human Subjects: A Reflexive Openness Approach

Lauren M. MacLean, Professor, Indiana University

Elliot Posner, Professor, Case Western Reserve University

Susan Thomson, Associate Professor, Colgate University

Elisabeth Jean Wood, Professor, Yale University

Summary: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=3332889>

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I.3 Power and Institutionalization

Rachel Beatty Riedl, Associate Professor, Northwestern University

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Leonardo R. Arriola, Associate Professor, University of California, Berkeley

Mark A. Pollack, Professor, Temple University

Anastasia Shesterinina, Lecturer, University of Sheffield

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Andrew Bennett, Professor, Georgetown University

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Lisa Björkman, Assistant Professor, University of Louisville

Lisa Wedeen, Professor, University of Chicago

Juliet A. Williams, Professor, UCLA

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Nicholas Rush Smith, Assistant Professor, The City College of New York

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Carsten Schneider, Professor, Central European University

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Summary: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=3333483>

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Ana Arjona, Associate Professor, Northwestern University
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Milli Lake, Assistant Professor, London School of Economics
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Rahsaan Maxwell, Associate Professor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
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Full report: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=3333503>

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Sarah E. Parkinson, Assistant Professor, Johns Hopkins University
Edward Schatz, Associate Professor, University of Toronto
Deborah J. Yashar, Professor, Princeton University

Over the last quarter century, a variety of intellectual and institutional efforts have been made in political science – often in parallel with developments in many of the natural and social sciences – to enable, encourage, or require scholars to be more open and explicit about the bases of their empirical claims and, in turn, to make those claims more readily evaluable by others. Important elements include Gary King's essay (1995) on replicability as an evaluative standard; the expansion of archiving infrastructure for both quantitative and qualitative data; the adoption of data-management, -archiving and replication policies by journals, publishers, and funders; technological developments that have made it easier to embed annotations and primary-source links in published output; and the Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT) initiative (see, esp. Lupia and Elman 2014) and associated Journal Editors' Transparency Statement (JETS), which, as of March 2019, has been signed by 27 political science journals.

Political scientists who develop and use qualitative methods have long taken an interest in – and put forth a broad range of innovative strategies for – making research open, reflexive, and analytically systematic (e.g., Van Evera 1997; George and Bennett 2005; Wedeen 2010; Brady and Collier 2010; Fujii 2012; Schatz 2013; Mosley 2013). However, the recent push for overarching transparency norms and requirements in the discipline – while relatively uncontroversial among quantitative scholars – has provoked serious concern among qualitative scholars. A 2015 symposium in *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research* (Büthe and Jacobs 2015a) featured, alongside arguments about benefits of enhanced research explicitness, a number of essays highlighting the ethical risks and intellectual limits of transparency requirements and, especially, data-sharing rules for some forms of social inquiry as well as potential chilling effects of such requirements for certain kinds of qualitative research.² A public letter signed by over 1100 political scientists in the fall of 2015 called for a delay to the implementation of the JETS to allow time for consultation and deliberation over aspects of the requirements that might have deleterious effects on qualitative research and its publication and might impinge on researchers' obligations to protect human subjects.³ These concerns arose, moreover, against a broader disciplinary backdrop in which qualitative research traditions appeared to many to be losing ground to quantitative methods on a number of fronts, including in the pages of leading journals. Further discussion of transparency's promise and perils for qualitative inquiry unfolded on the website dialogueondart.org, in the pages of the *Comparative Politics Newsletter*,⁴ and in a number of journal articles (e.g., Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2016; Monroe 2018; Tripp 2018).

The Qualitative Transparency Deliberations (QTD) – sponsored by the APSA's organized section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research – emerged in this context of accelerated rule-making on, and intensifying debate about, data-sharing and other forms of openness in political science research. The QTD was established as a venue within which qualitative scholars could deliberate the role, contribution, costs, and limitations of transparency in qualitative research. The QTD aimed to create discursive space for qualitative research communities in the discipline to work through and articulate understandings of and expectations around research transparency on

² See also Bleich and Pekkanen 2015; Trachtenberg 2015; Cramer 2015; Shih 2015; Parkinson and Wood 2015; Pachirat 2015; Romney, Stewart and Tingley 2015; Wagemann and Schneider 2015; Davison 2015; Fairfield 2015; Büthe and Jacobs 2015b; the full symposium can be found at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2652097>

³ See <https://dialogueondart.org/petition/>. Also, a number of political science journals announced and explained decisions not to sign on to the JETS. These included *World Politics* (Yashar 2016) and *Perspectives on Politics* (Isaac 2015).

⁴ See issue 26(1), available at http://comparativenewsletter.com/files/archived_newsletters/newsletter_spring2016.pdf.

their own methodological and substantive terms, while illuminating areas of shared and divergent understanding across the discipline. Amidst a debate often focused on large questions of principle, the process was also designed to draw attention to concrete research *practices* that qualitative scholars can and do employ to generate clear, evaluable, and rigorous research.

Several hundred political scientists took part in the deliberations, discussing questions such as: When and why is it beneficial for scholars to provide a detailed account of the methods by which they gathered and analyzed their evidence, and what are effective ways of providing this information? Under what conditions and how should scholars consider sharing "raw" qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, and what benefits might arise from doing so? What costs and practical constraints may limit scholars' ability to share their research materials? How should editors and reviewers for the globally dominant Anglo-American journals and presses, when articulating transparency expectations, take into account that political science scholarship is carried out in diverse political contexts and by scholars with highly unequal social and economic resources? What are the implications for transparency of researchers' ethical obligations toward human participants? Why and when might scholars have ethical imperatives *not* to share the unprocessed data underlying their claims, or even details of their empirical methods? What about transparency toward those who participate in our research? How well or poorly does the very concept of "transparency," with associated philosophical presumptions, fit with the epistemological and ontological premises on which different forms of qualitative research rest?

Policy issues, including the question of what kinds of transparency rules (if any) journal editors should adopt for qualitative researchers, constituted a key concern of many who took part in the deliberations.⁵ At the same time, the QTD was not set up as a debate over DA-RT/JETS or any other specific instantiation of transparency norms. Rather, the process was created to give qualitative scholars an opportunity to openly deliberate about the meaning of transparency, the benefits, costs and risks attending its pursuit, means of achieving it, and the limits of its usefulness.

The deliberations sought to create space for the emergence of differentiated, multi-dimensional understandings of these issues. Early critiques of the transparency movement within our profession focused in part on the danger of imposing "one size fits all" standards on widely differing forms of research. Some of the concern was about the imposition of common rules on quantitative and qualitative scholarship. Yet the category of "qualitative research" itself encompasses a vast range of logics of knowledge-production, methodologies, forms of evidence, and research settings. The meaning, value, costs, and operationalization of research transparency – and even its coherence as a concept – are likely to depend heavily on the particular form of qualitative scholarship in question. Further, the umbrella notion of transparency encompasses a highly diverse set of principles and practices, with potentially widely varying implications. For instance, the intellectual logic and the practical and ethical challenges of sharing the "raw" data underlying a study are likely to be very different from those of being explicit about the details of the analytic process or of disclosing potential conflicts of interest.

The QTD was, accordingly, designed to allow various research communities⁶ to arrive at different answers to the questions under discussion and to encourage a differentiated examination

⁵ See, in particular, the discussion of this issue in the report of working group I.3 on power and institutionalization.

⁶ While this symposium frequently differentiates between various research communities and types of researchers in the profession, we do not presume mutual exclusivity. To the contrary: many political scientists draw on multiple approaches, use various methods (even within a single project), and are members of multiple research communities. Further, virtually every quantitative study involves or builds on qualitative methods in the process of generating the

of transparency's multiple dimensions. The QTD has thus, in part, been a process of articulating and explaining differences to one another. This has included vigorous yet constructive debate over the utility and coherence of the very notion of research "transparency" and related concepts, such as openness, explicitness, reflexivity, and research integrity.⁷

On some issues, the outcome has been a mutual understanding of where consensus or compromise *cannot* be reached – where intellectual pluralism implies sustained disagreement.

At the same time, the process brought to the fore a striking range of agreement about the kinds of information that scholars ought to provide about how they have arrived at their empirical claims. Agreements about common and best research explicitness practices emerged mostly from *within* particular research communities. We highlight a number of these differentiated, community-specific understandings in this essay; they are discussed at greater length in the various reports in this symposium.

Reading across these reports and their central claims, moreover, we elaborate in this essay a core set of emergent findings of the QTD process. Among the most important are:

- there exists no single "meta-standard" of research transparency that can operate coherently across all logics of qualitative inquiry;
- sharing some source materials is seen as an intellectually valuable practice within many qualitative research traditions; however, uniform and maximalist data-sharing requirements would be highly problematic for ethical, practical, and epistemological reasons;
- researchers' ethical obligations to protect human participants and their communities ought to take priority over the sharing of information with research consumers.

In addition, we identify relatively broad consensus among qualitative research communities on the importance of detailed and explicit discussion, in the publication or presentation of research findings, of three general features of an empirical inquiry:

- the process through which the evidence used in a study was generated;
- the analytic process through which the scholar arrived at conclusions; and
- the risks faced by human participants in a study and the steps taken to protect them and their communities.

This symposium elaborates these and other key findings emerging from the deliberative process. Its centerpiece is a set of executive summaries of the reports issued by the working groups that led the deliberations. The full reports constitute the Supplemental Material, found online at the link provided in each summary's first footnote.⁸

data it uses; the issues discussed in the QTD reports are thus relevant to the qualitative elements of any political analysis.

⁷ Although the terms may mean different things to different readers, we use research transparency, openness and explicitness interchangeably in this essay.

⁸ Note that the QTD's output is not limited to the working group reports and summaries. As most of the underlying consultations took place online in written form, the text of these discussions should themselves be understood as part

We hope these reports will contribute to professional debates and practices in several ways, including by:

- advancing scholarly understandings of the meaning of transparency in different forms of qualitative research, including its conceptual limits for some research traditions;
- providing researchers with practical guidance on specific ways of being open or explicit about various elements of the research process, including about their potential benefits, costs, and risks;
- informing graduate student training in research design and methods; and
- informing policy- and decision-making by reviewers, editors, and funders seeking to develop and apply standards and criteria of evaluation that are appropriate – as understood by relevant research communities – to the logics of inquiry and forms of the research being assessed.

Moreover, in the service of informing scholarly practice, most reports identify and discuss specific works of qualitative political science that showcase particular research and research communication strategies.

The remainder of this essay provides an overview of the deliberative process and its main findings. Following an account of the QTD's origins and procedures, we discuss the meanings of transparency that emerged from the deliberations, unpacking the diverse forms of research explicitness that the QTD working groups conceptualized and examined, including some that have not featured prominently in previous disciplinary discussions. We then sketch the key benefits of transparency identified in the deliberations, including gains for the interpretability and assessment of research, for research processes, and for human participants. Next, we discuss important tradeoffs highlighted in the deliberations, outlining costs and risks that some openness practices or requirements might imply for participants, researchers, and political science scholarship more broadly, not least because the downside risks might be exacerbated by inequalities across scholars and institutions. This is followed by a consideration of a more fundamental critique of the transparency agenda, elaborated by some participants operating in interpretivist research traditions, as incompatible with the logics of knowledge-production on which much qualitative research rests. In the penultimate section, we draw together the implications of the deliberations for research practices, identifying key areas of consensus and disagreement across research communities, and drawing attention to a number of concrete transparency strategies highlighted or proposed in the reports. We close by discussing the implications of the QTD's findings for the work of editors, reviewers, funding agencies, and professional bodies in the discipline.

THE QTD PROCESS⁹

At its 2015 business meeting, against the backdrop of broader debates about transparency in the profession, the APSA's Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (QMMR)

of the QTD's contribution to disciplinary debates about qualitative research openness. For the full text of these deliberations, see [SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS OR WWW.QUALTD.NET].

⁹ Full details of the QTD process can be found on the QTD website at <https://www.qualtd.net/page/about> and <https://www.qualtd.net/page/qtd-process>.

unanimously passed a motion to initiate a process of deliberation over transparency in qualitative research. The motion tasked Tim Bütthe and Alan Jacobs with drawing up and putting before the section membership a proposal for this deliberative process. In the winter of 2015-2016, the proposal went to an online vote of all QMMR section members, passing with 98% in favor on turnout of 303 out of 645 members.

QMMR section president, Peter Hall, then proceeded to appoint a 10-person Steering Committee that would include scholars engaging in a wide range of forms of qualitative research. The Steering Committee was composed of Andrew Bennett, Erik Bleich, Mary Hawkesworth, Kimberley S. Johnson, Kimberly Morgan, Sarah E. Parkinson, Edward Schatz, and Deborah Yashar, with Bütthe and Jacobs serving as co-chairs.

The QTD Steering Committee organized a first, agenda-setting phase of deliberations, which unfolded online in the spring of 2016. During Stage I, scholars from across the profession were invited – via a wide range of online channels, including APSA section and other email lists – to participate in an open-ended online consultation on the questions and concerns on which the deliberations should focus. Over 170 comments were received during this stage.¹⁰ Among the vast number of issues and questions raised were the variety of possible meanings of "transparency" and forms it might take; the value of different transparency practices; the implications of data-sharing for the safety of research participants; concerns about the fit between transparency requirements and the logic of particular qualitative methodologies or their underlying epistemological and ontological premises; and the scale and equity of the burdens that data-access rules might impose on qualitative scholars, and especially junior scholars.

Based on this initial input, the Steering Committee appointed a set of 13 working groups to lead consultations and deliberations on different aspects of the topic. One common focus of many Stage 1 comments was the relationship between transparency and *particular* forms and settings of inquiry, suggesting that transparency's practicalities, benefits, costs, and limitations is highly conditional on the *kind* of qualitative research in question. The Steering Committee thus organized the working-group mandates in a way that would allow for a differentiated consideration of transparency's merits and mechanics for different types of scholarship.

The working groups were organized into four broad clusters, as are the report summaries in this symposium. Cluster I consisted of three working groups focused on a set of "fundamental" issues that cut across particular research traditions:

- the relationship between scholars' understandings of transparency and the epistemological or ontological presumptions underlying their work (I.1);
- the interface between openness and researchers' ethical obligations to protect human subjects (I.2);
- the institutional form that any pursuit of research explicitness might take – ranging from strictly voluntary individual practices to obligatory prescriptions (rules) with centralized enforcement – and how these interact with power and resource differentials in the profession (I.3).

¹⁰ Participants could choose either to identify themselves or to post anonymously. The comments received during Stage 1 are available on the QTD website at <https://www.qualtd.net/viewforum.php?f=10>. A topic index of the Stage 1 posts can be found here: <https://www.qualtd.net/viewtopic.php?f=10&t=85>.

Cluster II was structured to allow deliberation on how the meaning, value, and challenges of transparency might vary across forms of qualitative evidence. Group II.1 was tasked with considering text-based sources while group II.2 focused on evidence derived from researchers' direct interactions with human research participants.

Cluster III unpacked the problem by analytic approach or methodology, with groups dedicated to considering process tracing and comparative methods (III.1), interpretive methodologies (III.2), ethnography (III.3), set-theoretic approaches, especially Qualitative Comparative Analysis, QCA (III.4), and manual content analysis (III.5).

Finally, in Cluster IV, working groups considered the complexities of pursuing transparency in particular research contexts – authoritarian or repressive political settings (IV.1) or settings of political violence (IV.2) – or for research with vulnerable or marginalized populations (IV.3).

The Steering Committee recruited for each working group three or four scholars who regularly engage in the kind of research, or have special expertise in the issue area, on which the group was to focus. In staffing the working groups, the Steering Committee also aimed to capture a range of approaches encompassed within each group's mandate, broad regional expertise, and diversity in demographic backgrounds, career stages, and institutional affiliations (e.g., public/private, research-/teaching-oriented).

With the support of the National Science Foundation, the Steering Committee and all working groups met prior to the 2016 Annual Meeting of the APSA to discuss the overall mandate and objectives toward which the deliberations should be oriented. Drawing on this discussion, the Steering Committee suggested a set of common, core questions to guide the consultations, deliberations, and reports of the working groups in Clusters II, III, and IV – those focused on particular forms or settings of research. Specifically, each group was asked to consider, for the kind of evidence, analytic methodology, or research setting that they were tasked with examining:

- the meaning of transparency as a concept (including the potential lack of a coherent meaning);
- transparency's intellectual, social, or ethical benefits;
- the costs and risks of, or obstacles to, pursuing transparency; and
- concrete practices through which scholars might either realize greater transparency or otherwise (i.e., without the use of transparency practices) generate research that is insightful, credible, and evaluable.

While the QTD's original declared objective was to assess transparency's promise and limits for different forms of qualitative research, early discussions among participants revealed concerns about putting this concept at the center of the process. Some participants viewed "transparency" as too closely tied to DA-RT's specific operationalization of research openness, which presumed a particular mode of research while excluding important forms of information-sharing in which qualitative scholars might usefully engage. Other colleagues raised a more fundamental objection, arguing that transparency was inextricably linked to a particular, empiricist view of knowledge-production (discussed further below); they voiced a concern that a focus on "transparency" would thus privilege a narrow set of philosophical premises to the exclusion of others. Still others held that qualitative scholars should maintain a focus on "transparency" but adapt or expand its meaning

in ways appropriate to qualitative research logics – thus laying claim to the intellectual "high ground" that the concept occupies, rather than ceding that ground to other research traditions.

The controversy surrounding the QTD's focal concept presented the Steering Committee with a dilemma in setting the terms of discussion. Should we be talking about transparency? And if not, what should we be talking about? Among the possible options were (1) to maintain a clear focus on "transparency" but seek to expand its meaning to encompass the varied logics and norms of qualitative inquiry; (2) replace the concept with an alternative such as "openness," "explicitness," or "research integrity"; or (3) to broaden the scope of deliberation to encompass both an expansive notion of transparency and related concepts. The Steering Committee opted for the third approach, asking working groups to consider transparency as one of a number of possible means of achieving broader end goals, including richer communication about knowledge-production, research integrity, and professional ethics. In framing the discussion in these terms, the committee also sought to make space for participants to critique or even reject transparency as an intellectual value and to elucidate alternative mechanisms for generating evaluable, interpretable claims and for advancing the ethical pursuit and cumulation of knowledge. In the end, the majority of groups chose to frame their findings in terms of "transparency," regardless of the stance that they took on the issues under consideration. The "Ethnography and Participant Observation" and the "Interpretive Methods" working groups, as well as one of the "Epistemological and Ontological Priors" subgroups, on the other hand, chose to part ways with the terminology of transparency as a poor philosophical fit for the logics of inquiry that they were examining and to employ alternative concepts. Moreover, the working group on "Research Ethics and Human Subjects," while acknowledging the value of "transparency" in some settings, advances a broad and distinct approach of "reflexive openness" that emphasizes sustained reflection on ethical research practices, as elaborated further below. At the same time, these reports also make clear that research communities that reject transparency's epistemological baggage do not uniformly reject all of the concrete *practices* with which it is associated. It appears that research communities sometimes engage in similar practices of scholarly communication for different intellectual reasons.

With the broad terms of discussion established, the 13 working groups engaged in wide-ranging consultations (Stage II) from September 2016 into early 2017, gathering the views of interested research communities on the questions at hand. These consultations unfolded mostly online and on the record, with each group facilitating its own discussion forum on qualtd.net. Over 500 additional comments were received across the 13 working groups. Stage I and Stage II posts have been viewed a total of over 100,000 times,¹¹ suggesting interest in these discussions that extended well beyond those who actively participated. In an age of rampant online incivility, it is worth noting that the exchanges on the QTD forums, including those involving anonymous participants, were almost entirely respectful in tone and substantive in nature.¹²

At the close of the Stage 2 consultations, the working groups began drafting their reports, drawing on consultative input, broader disciplinary debates over transparency, and their own discussions. These reports were posted on the QTD website in September 2017, with public comment invited through the fall. In early 2018, groups embarked on revisions to their reports in

¹¹ Count based on July 2017 version of discussions forums.

¹² While the Steering Committee reserved the right to remove uncivil posts from the platform, the Committee did not view any post as warranting removal.

response to online comments and feedback from the Steering Committee, with reports and executive summaries finalized in the summer and fall of 2018.

FORMS OF TRANSPARENCY

We turn now to the substantive insights that emerged from the deliberations. The QTD's terms of discussion left the meaning of research transparency open, allowing research communities to consider the merits of any form of information-sharing, in the process of research or publication, which they saw as worthy of examination. Taken together, the deliberations and the reports suggest a wide range of ways in which researchers (qualitative or otherwise) might choose to be transparent. In particular, scholars may be explicit about:

- **research goals**, including a project's intellectual, political or social objectives.
- **processes of generating evidence**, including details of the sites of data-collection; the location of sources; the criteria according to which sites, sources, or cases were selected for analysis; how access to sources or human participants was obtained; the nature of any interactions with human participants (e.g., the questions asked); coding procedures or other means used to turn raw observations into analyzable data; and any mid-course changes in evidence-gathering plans and procedures.
- **analytic processes** used to draw conclusions from the evidence by, among other things, identifying any assumptions or features of context on which the analysis rests; providing an account of the (possibly iterative) sequence in which evidence was analyzed and hypotheses were developed; discussing any iteration between the two; and reporting on hypotheses that failed to be supported by the evidence.¹³
- **researcher positionality** by explicitly reflecting on how the researcher's position within power structures, especially vis-à-vis other research participants, might have influenced the kinds of evidence they have gathered and how they have interpreted it.¹⁴
- **researcher subjectivity** by explicitly reflecting on how the researcher's life experiences and individual characteristics might have influenced the kinds of evidence they have gathered and how they have interpreted it.
- **risks to human participants/communities** by providing, in presentations and publications, a discussion of the harms that their research or its dissemination might pose to those who participated in the study or their communities, and of how those risks were managed in the course of the project.
- **conflicts of interest** that the researcher(s) might have, or appear to have, including any vested interest in project outcomes, the sources of project funding, and relevant personal affiliations.

In addition to providing information about these aspects of the research process, scholars might also choose to engage in:

¹³ See also Yom 2015.

¹⁴ Definition adapted from authoritarianism report (IV.1).

- **Data-sharing:** Researchers might make available to others elements of the original or “raw” source material that they have analyzed, such as the contents of textual sources or interview transcripts. Data-sharing might take maximalist forms, such as the sharing of a complete interview transcript (possibly annotated with ethnographic observations), or more limited forms, such as the sharing of extended excerpts from a source text. Data might be shared within a book or article itself, whether in the body of the text or via a digital annotation, and/or posted on a digital platform or repository.

In addition, as a number of reports note, scholars working with human subjects must – separately – make choices about **transparency toward research participants** in regard to the above aspects of the research and dissemination process, including about the degree and nature of data-sharing that will take place.

In short, the deliberations suggested a substantially more expansive understanding of “research transparency” than implied by recent disciplinary discussions. The DA-RT initiative, for instance, focused almost exclusively on data-sharing, transparency about evidence-generation, and transparency of analytic process – all within the context of openness toward the *consumers* of a research product. The QTD reports point to a far wider array of features of the research process about which scholars might usefully share information, with both research audiences and research participants. Importantly, the reports also point to and discuss a large number of specific published pieces of qualitative political science scholarship that put these various forms of research explicitness into practice.

In the next three sections, we provide a synthesis of the deliberations. We begin by identifying the key benefits that qualitative scholars see as arising from different forms of research transparency. Next, we consider potential drawbacks of the pursuit of transparency—adverse consequences for the production of knowledge and risks to research participants—upon which the deliberations shed light. The essay turns then to a more fundamental critique of the concept of “research transparency” as incoherent and incompatible with the ontologies, logics of inquiry, and evaluative standards underpinning some forms of qualitative scholarship.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TRANSPARENCY

Notwithstanding concerns about the drive for greater transparency, the QTD process revealed that many qualitative research communities – *including those with serious concerns* – believe that many forms of research explicitness promise intellectual and social benefits.

Greater understanding. A number of working groups point out that providing clear and detailed information about research goals, the process of generating evidence, and the analytic process can help readers make sense of published research and its conclusions.¹⁵ Knowing why a given piece of research was undertaken and how the findings emerged aids in understanding key claims and their implications. As the group examining research on vulnerable and marginalized populations pointed out, identifying risks to human participants and explaining how the researcher chose to mitigate those risks can help readers understand why the researcher got the results they

¹⁵ See, for instance, the reports on text-based sources (II.1), comparative methods and process tracing (III.1), content analysis (III.5), QCA (III.4), and research with vulnerable/marginalized populations (IV.3).

did and how results might have differed if a different approach had been employed.¹⁶ Moreover, scholars working in interpretivist traditions argue that stating and explaining the epistemological premises and intellectual goals underlying their methods and findings can help comprehension, especially among readers based in other traditions.¹⁷

Gains to research assessment. Qualitative scholars quite broadly agree that various forms of transparency can improve research evaluation. These gains can operate on a number of levels.

In quantitative research, the sharing of data and code is often meant to enable *replicability* as an evaluative standard. For the research communities at the core of the QTD, by contrast, transparency contributes to research assessment primarily in ways unrelated to replication. By far the most commonly expressed view was that the provision of more information about the research process helps research audiences better identify potential biases or other threats to the validity of findings. Readers can more easily evaluate the quality of the evidence and assess how research context and researcher choices might have shaped or distorted conclusions more easily when scholars provide accounts of:

- how or by whom textual sources were produced;¹⁸
- why particular sources were chosen for analysis;¹⁹
- how access was gained to field sites;²⁰
- how sites were chosen and interlocutors recruited;²¹
- how views were solicited from human participants;²²
- what information was shared with them;²³
- what efforts were made to protect research participants in high-risk settings;²⁴
- how the researcher's social position might have shaped interactions in the field;²⁵
- how funding sources might have affected participation in the study;²⁶ and
- how inferences were drawn from observations.²⁷

A clear account of evidence-gathering and analytic processes can also help readers evaluate the risks of "cherry-picking," even when the raw data themselves cannot be fully shared.²⁸ The deliberations on transparency in political violence research, in particular, generated intriguing ideas about how scholars can render their analytic methods more transparent and their empirical

¹⁶ See report IV.3.

¹⁷ See reports on evidence from research with human participants (II.2), ethnography (III.3), and research on political violence (IV.2).

¹⁸ See report on textual sources (II.1). See also Trachtenberg 2006: esp. 51ff.

¹⁹ On transparency about the production and selection of textual sources, see report II.1. On selection, see report on content analysis (III.5).

²⁰ See ethnography report (III.3).

²¹ See, e.g., report on evidence from research with human participants (II.2).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See report on research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1) and research in violent contexts (IV.2).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See report on research in violent contexts (IV.2).

²⁷ See, e.g., report III.1

²⁸ See, e.g., reports on text-based sources (II.1) and on research with vulnerable and marginalized populations (IV.3).

claims more susceptible to external scrutiny without the full sharing of data.²⁹ Finally, as the group examining process tracing points out, *formalizing* certain aspects of qualitative analysis – such as background beliefs and the probative value of evidence – can make it even clearer how conclusions have been derived from an array of observations and make it easier for readers to evaluate empirical findings.³⁰

Moreover, some QTD groups pointed to the contribution that data-sharing can make to effective evaluation by enabling alternative interpretations: Access to the underlying data will allow readers to compare the authors' interpretations to their own.³¹

Further, and perhaps most fundamentally, clarity about research goals (e.g., are we trying to identify causal relations among variables or interpreting social practices?) and underlying epistemological commitments can help ensure that readers apply *standards* of assessment that are appropriate to the logic of inquiry being employed.³²

Thus, for many qualitative scholars, transparency aids evaluation in ways that do not turn on the notion of replicability. At the same time, some qualitative researchers view replication as an important tool of research assessment and see transparency as facilitating its operation. Replication is often understood in the relatively narrow senses of *verification* (examining whether we can generate the same finding by applying the same analytic steps to the same data) or *reanalysis* (examining whether results change when we apply different analytic procedures to the same data; see Büthe and Jacobs 2015b: 57f; see also Clemens 2017). Both for algorithmic qualitative approaches (such as QCA) and for methods that involve the coding of textual or audio-visual information (such as manual content analysis), verification and reanalysis are often viewed as important forms of evaluation, and scholars using such methods understand data-sharing and transparency of the analytic process as critical to enabling these forms of replication.³³ Further, even in a non-algorithmic context, those seeking to evaluate claims grounded in textual sources may find it easier to assess those claims if they can read and analyze the original sources themselves, an evaluative process not unlike verification or reanalysis.³⁴

Moreover, transparency can contribute to replication in a broader sense. The working group on research with vulnerable and marginalized populations, for instance, argues that transparency about processes of generating evidence and analytic process can help scholars assess the *reproducibility* of a finding – using the same data-gathering and analytic procedures to study a different sample from the same population. Or it may allow them to *extend* the finding by testing it via the same methods with respect to a different population. Importantly, as this group points out, replication in these broader senses can be undertaken *without access to the original data*; but it does require information about how the evidence was collected and the analysis undertaken in the original study.

Benefits for the research process. The kinds of things that a researcher needs to do to make information available to readers and research participants might also improve the research process

²⁹ See report IV.2.

³⁰ See report III.1.

³¹ See the report on evidence from research with human subjects (II.2) and, on making textual sources findable, report II.1.

³² See reports on ethnography (III.3) and research in violent contexts (IV.2).

³³ See reports III.4 and III.5. The working group on research in violent contexts (IV.2) also reports input from colleagues who see data-sharing as important for replication-based evaluation.

³⁴ See report on text-based sources (II.1).

itself. As one group points out, keeping track of data-gathering procedures, organizing one's evidence, writing down one's analytic steps in a manner that would make them clear to readers helps researchers in their use and interpretation of sources and facilitates writing.³⁵

Public goods. A number of research communities see benefits that extend beyond the particulars of a given study, including empirical and methodological gains for future researchers. Working groups examining textual forms of evidence, evidence drawn from research with human subjects, and content analysis understand data-sharing or making sources easily findable as providing an evidentiary foundation on which future researchers can build, avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort and aiding the cumulation of knowledge.³⁶ Colleagues likewise point to the ways in which clear accounts of data-collection, coding procedures, and the logic of a methodology can serve as a resource for scholars who might consider employing such approaches in their own work.³⁷

Colleagues who undertake fieldwork in high-risk contexts point out spillover benefits of transparency *toward* human subjects: openness and honesty with research participants may help to build trust enhancing the quality of data when future researchers return to these field sites.

Benefits to human participants. While some forms of transparency primarily benefit research producers and consumers, transparency toward human participants benefits participants themselves. Colleagues understand disclosure of the purposes and potential risks of participation in a research project as a fundamental ethical obligation to potential participants, underwriting their ability to make informed choices about participation.³⁸ Some colleagues working in settings of political violence see disclosure of funding sources as equally critical to informed consent.³⁹ And scholars conducting research with vulnerable or marginalized populations point out that sharing information can help to counteract the power imbalance that often exists between researchers and participants.⁴⁰

Limits to transparency's benefits. The deliberations also brought to the surface a sense of the bounds on transparency's benefits. For scholars in some research traditions, there are limited gains to making "raw" empirical materials – such as interview transcripts or field notes – accessible to readers. One key reason is context-dependence: transcripts and field notes would be difficult for readers to decipher without a deep understanding of the empirical setting or the countless observations and impressions that inform researchers' interpretations but are never recorded.⁴¹ A second reason is that not all research materials constitute raw "data" extracted from the world: field notes, for instance, are often more a record of the researcher's evolving understanding of the subject.⁴² Releasing such notes would do little to facilitate independent assessment or replication of the findings.

³⁵ See report on text-based sources (II.1).

³⁶ See reports on text-based sources (II.1), evidence from research with human participants (II.2), and content analysis (III.5).

³⁷ See reports on QCA (III.4), content analysis (III.5), and research in violent contexts (IV.2).

³⁸ See, e.g., reports on Ethics (I.2), research in violent contexts (IV.2), and research with marginalized and vulnerable populations (IV.3).

³⁹ See report IV.2

⁴⁰ See report IV.3.

⁴¹ See reports on evidence from research with human subjects (II.2), ethnography (III.3), research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1),

⁴² See, e.g., the report on ethnography (III.3).

More fundamentally, the concept of "transparency" is seen as having little epistemological purchase for scholars working within non-positivist traditions. We discuss these deeper, philosophical objections later in the essay.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND COSTS

Most QTD research communities understand transparency as involving tradeoffs among values. While seeing numerous benefits to research explicitness, most qualitative scholars also view certain kinds of openness in certain contexts as posing risks to those who participate in the research process and as involving costs for scholars and the field as a whole. These risks arise from two forms of transparency in particular: data-sharing and transparency about processes of generating evidence.

Risks to human participants. As a large number of QTD contributors observed, the sharing of the data underlying qualitative research can pose serious risks to human participants in social research. In sharing raw data – such as full interview transcripts or field notes – researchers might inadvertently reveal the identity of human participants, violating their privacy and promises of anonymity or confidentiality and, possibly, data-protection commitments made to Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). In some circumstances, revealing participants' identities may expose them to a range of potential harms – from shame or harassment to the loss of livelihood, imprisonment, torture, or even death. Such risks will tend to be especially pronounced in particular kinds of research contexts, such as violent or post-conflict regions or repressive political settings, and for populations that are politically, socially, or economically vulnerable or marginalized.⁴³ Yet, even participants who are not particularly “at risk” and who are living in stable, democratic settings may want their privacy protected and suffer stigmatization or other forms of social sanction if their verbatim statements and identities are made public.

One commonly proposed solution to this problem is anonymizing or otherwise scrubbing notes and transcripts of identifiers. Several of the reports, however, point out the limits of anonymization and the difficulty of determining which details might later allow "deductive disclosure." Journalists, for instance, managed to use details of Alice Goffman's narrative in *On the Run* to identify individuals whose identities Goffman thought she had protected.⁴⁴ In communities under close government surveillance, phrases used, events referenced, or even the date and time of an interview may be sufficient to reveal interlocutors' identities.⁴⁵ In some situations, even information about how evidence was gathered – say, a detailed account of sampling and data-collection procedures – might provide sufficient information to identify individuals or communities that participated in a research project.⁴⁶

Informed consent is also frequently seen as a sufficient basis for sharing data derived from research with human participants. If participants have been informed about project goals, methods, and foreseeable risks of taking part; have not been subjected to any undue pressure; and have

⁴³ See reports on research ethics (I.2), evidence from research with human subjects (II.2), ethnography (III.3), research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1) and in settings of political violence (IV.2), and research with vulnerable/marginalized populations (IV.3).

⁴⁴ See ethnography report (III.3).

⁴⁵ See reports on evidence from research with human subjects (II.2), research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1) and violent settings (IV.2) and with marginalized/vulnerable populations (IV.3).

⁴⁶ See reports on evidence from research with human subjects (II.2)

explicitly agreed that transcripts or field notes may be shared, one might reason, then there is no ethical quandary insofar as participants have made a free choice and have accepted any risks that might flow from this decision. Yet, several of the working-group discussions identified reasons why, and circumstances under which, informed consent may be insufficient as an ethical warrant for sharing verbatim transcripts or other forms of "raw" data drawn from interactions with human participants.

For one thing, the risks of sharing may be difficult for participants to foresee at the time that consent is granted. What may seem like a low-risk disclosure today might become high risk in the future, as political and social conditions change.⁴⁷ Complicating matters further, data-sharing can have implications not just for direct participants in the research process but also for other members of their community, who will typically never have the opportunity to grant or withhold consent.⁴⁸ In violent and post-conflict settings, moreover, full transcripts posted online might aggravate tensions by revealing the unspoken beliefs and values of some community members.⁴⁹ The meaningfulness of consent may also be undermined by resource and power differentials; participants living in extreme poverty, for instance, might acquiesce in researcher requests in the hope of eventual material rewards, even when none are offered.⁵⁰ Some colleagues argued, further, that participant consent can never substitute for the researcher's own risk-assessment; if the researcher is aware of risks that may have been unknown to participants, then sharing would be unethical, even if participants agreed to sharing.⁵¹ Nor can IRB approval stand in for ethical judgment, particularly given that IRB rules typically cover only research subjects and not other individuals, such as local interpreters and field assistants, whose safety may be compromised if their identities were revealed.⁵²

Threats to researcher safety. Scholars often expose themselves to risk when undertaking intensive fieldwork. Some QTD groups called attention to the possibility that extensive data-sharing might heighten risks to researchers, especially those operating in violent or repressive settings, by revealing details of field sites and about the communities or individuals with whom they interacted.⁵³

Consequences for data quality. Contributors to the QTD pointed to multiple ways in which routine data-sharing – especially if uniformly required by publication outlets – might undermine the quality of the data that researchers are able to collect. Requiring subjects to consent to the public release of interview transcripts or field notes might introduce biases. Participants willing to allow the researcher to share their verbatim statements and accounts of their behavior may be systematically different from those who are unwilling, in ways closely related to the questions of

⁴⁷ See reports on research ethics (I.2), evidence from research with human participants (II.2), ethnography (III.3) and on research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1), in settings of political violence (IV.2), and with vulnerable/marginalized populations (IV.3). See also Knott (2019).

⁴⁸ See reports on ethics (I.2), ethnography (III.3), and research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1).

⁴⁹ See report on research in violent settings (IV.2).

⁵⁰ See report on ethics (I.2).

⁵¹ See report on research with vulnerable/marginalized populations (IV.3).

⁵² See report on research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1). More generally on the limitations of IRBs as adjudicators of ethical risk in political science research, see the reports on political violence research (IV.2) and on research with vulnerable and marginalized populations (IV.3), as well as on power and institutionalization (I.3)

⁵³ See report on research in violent settings (IV.2) and on evidence from research with human participants (II.2). On threats to researchers working in China, see Greitens and Truex (forthcoming).

interest.⁵⁴ Further, those who *do* take part are less likely to provide candid responses if they know that full transcripts will be made publicly available.⁵⁵ Researchers who post records of previous interactions at a field site may find future access barred.⁵⁶

Consequences for topics studied. From the perspective of some research communities, the adoption of comprehensive qualitative data-sharing requirements by leading political science outlets would threaten the discipline's ability to address many important topics. It might discourage researchers from, for instance, undertaking research in settings of political violence or with vulnerable and marginalized populations, asking sensitive questions, or exploring research frontiers where the data a scholar collects cannot easily be made legible. These disincentives would likely hit junior scholars – whose career prospects hinge on early, high-status publications – especially hard. Scholars working at resource-poor institutions, in developing countries, or under illiberal political regimes would most acutely confront the disincentivizing and constraining effects of transparency norms, especially if institutionalized as strict requirements.⁵⁷ Alternatively, researchers might simply choose to publish their research in non-political-science outlets, effectively driving the qualitative study of sensitive topics from disciplinary journals.⁵⁸

Costs to researchers. Colleagues further noted that the time required for the preparation of qualitative data for depositing could be considerable. Particularly labor-intensive aspects of the process may include the digitization of source materials, translation, and the scrubbing of transcripts and notes of potentially identifying information.⁵⁹ The deliberations also elicited concerns about the potentially inequitable distribution of these burdens. The costs of rendering data in shareable form may on average be higher for qualitative than for quantitative forms of evidence;⁶⁰ will be more difficult for junior scholars and those at less well-resourced institutions to bear;⁶¹ and will be higher for scholars working on more sensitive topics and in higher-risk locations than for others.⁶² At the same time, the working group on textual sources points out that data-sharing is not a binary, "all or nothing" choice. Scholars might be able to mitigate many of the associated costs, for instance, by providing access to a select set of documents or transcript passages that are especially informative about an empirical claim.⁶³

Other costs and limitations. QTD working groups identified a number of other tradeoffs or constraints, including the loss of exclusive use of the data by researchers who may have invested heavily in its generation⁶⁴ and copyright and other legal restrictions on dissemination of

⁵⁴ See reports on research ethics (I.2), evidence from research with human participants (II.2), ethnography (III.3), and research in violent settings (IV.2).

⁵⁵ See reports on research ethics (I.2), evidence from research with human participants (II.2), research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1), and research with vulnerable/marginalized populations (IV.3).

⁵⁶ See report on research in violent settings (IV.2).

⁵⁷ See reports on research ethics (I.2), power and institutionalization (I.3), ethnography (III.3), research in violent settings (IV.2), and research with vulnerable/marginalized populations (IV.3).

⁵⁸ See report on research in violent settings (IV.2).

⁵⁹ See reports on textual sources (II.1), evidence from research with human participants (II.2), content analysis (III.5), and research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1). See also Hall (2016) for a discussion of these and related costs.

⁶⁰ See report on evidence from research with human participants (II.2).

⁶¹ See *ibid* and reports on ethnography (III.3) and research in violent settings (IV.2).

⁶² See report on research ethics (I.2).

⁶³ See report II.1.

⁶⁴ Noted in reports on textual sources (II.1), evidence from research with human participants (II.2), content analysis (III.5), and research in violent settings (IV.2).

documents.⁶⁵ Colleagues also pointed to ways in which, beyond a certain point, greater transparency may actually undermine, rather than enhance, understanding. Excessively long and complex transparency appendices, for instance, may obscure the most important features for readers to attend to.⁶⁶ Similarly, methods featuring extremely high levels of analytic explicitness – such as formal, Bayesian process tracing – may generate less readable and comprehensible text than do more informal, narrative approaches.⁶⁷

To summarize the foregoing discussion: For many qualitative scholars, the pursuit of transparency involves a set of potential *tradeoffs*: between the intellectual and social value of different forms of research explicitness, on the one hand, and the risks that these practices might entail for participants and the costs that they may impose on researchers and on the quality of the research process, on the other hand.

PHILOSOPHICAL OBJECTIONS

Other QTD participants fundamentally question the usefulness and desirability of research transparency. From the perspective of some qualitative research communities, "research transparency" is an intellectually incoherent notion grounded in a narrow and questionable set of presumptions about how knowledge is produced. The transparency agenda also threatens to sideline scholars who do not view data as "extractable." For these scholars, evidence is not like raw material, inertly available for removal and unmediated by a broader social environment. "Reality" does not exist independently of the observer and the socio-political worlds within which she operates.

A detailed discussion of this critique can be found in the two reports on epistemological and ontological priors (I.1a and esp. I.1b), the report on interpretive methods (III.2), and the ethnography report (III.3). We highlight key issues here.

Transparency's Philosophically Contingent Meaning: Prominent proponents of transparency in political science have referred to research transparency as a universal "meta-standard"⁶⁸ that has different particular implications for different scholarly approaches. From this perspective, all logics of social inquiry share the meta-standard of research transparency; achieving it may merely require scholars to take different specific steps depending on the particular methods they employ. In contrast to this view, numerous QTD participants and the reports of working groups I.1a and I.1b point out that the concept of research transparency is inextricably bound up with a particular understanding knowledge-production – an understanding that may fit well with some logics of social inquiry but is incompatible with others.

Data-Analysis Dichotomy: Central to this incompatibility are differences regarding the relationship between empirical information and analysis. The concept of research transparency, as articulated by its advocates in the discipline, is grounded in a model of empirical social inquiry in which the researcher collects evidence, or "data," and then subjects that evidence to some set of

⁶⁵ See report on textual sources (II.1).

⁶⁶ See report on QCA (III.4).

⁶⁷ See report on comparative methods and process tracing (III.1). See also Hall (2016) and Trachtenberg (2015) on the readability costs of some forms of transparency.

⁶⁸ Elman and Kapiszewski 2014, p. 44.

analytic procedures.⁶⁹ This account, however, is not coherent from the perspective of many non-positivist research traditions. A key problem is the implied separability of evidence and analysis. For interpretivists, all observation is theory-laden. Theoretical presuppositions mediate perceptions, organize observations, and demarcate which stimuli qualify as evidence. Data, in some modes of interpretive analysis, are also fundamentally relational, encompassing both what was observed and the researcher's own reactions to interlocutors and field sites.⁷⁰ For most interpretivist scholars, therefore, evidence is never "raw"; and analysis and interpretation are not performed *on* evidence but are constitutive of it.

One place where this problem takes concrete form is in sharing ethnographic field notes. As the ethnography working group puts it, field notes are not an unfiltered documentation of events but "pieces of a long process of sorting out what the ethnographer thinks her field interlocutors understand to be happening and how she interprets their understandings."⁷¹ Ethnographic researchers "encounter, absorb, and process" much more information than field notes could ever capture, including deep knowledge of context. Field notes cannot be treated as a comprehensive transcript of the evidence since they necessarily omit a great deal of the observations and information that shape the researcher's interpretation. As the ethnography working group points out, sharing ethnographic field notes might be informative – perhaps about the biases that shaped the researcher's observations and interpretations. But viewing this action as transparency or data-sharing would misconstrue the process of inquiry through which those records were generated.

Misleading Ocular Metaphor: Relatedly, for many interpretivists, the concept of "transparency" is problematic in that it promises a form of knowledge that is fundamentally out of reach. The term rests on an ocular metaphor, implying the possibility of *seeing through* to gain access to things *in themselves* or things *as they really are*.⁷² From key non-positivist epistemological perspectives, such as presupposition theory, the clarity of vision implied by the metaphor is inherently and inevitably illusory. While methods can be explicated and assumptions outlined, we never have full, conscious access to the deep theoretical constructs that structure our perceptions and understandings.⁷³ Importantly, this is not a disagreement about the value of effective research communication. Interpretive ethnographers, for instance, routinely provide detailed explanations of how sources and field sites were selected and thick descriptions of their engagements with interlocutors. Central to much interpretive analysis, moreover, are forms of information-sharing – such as explicit reflection on the researcher's subjectivity or positionality – that, arguably, involve more radical candor than envisioned by mainstream "open science."⁷⁴ But to equate the explication of a research process with "transparency" – with an unveiling of the scaffolding that undergirds conclusions – is to misconstrue the model of knowledge production on which many interpretive scholars operate.

Value of Transparency for Research Assessment: The deliberations also exposed a related divergence regarding the value of transparency for the assessment of scholarly work, particularly in regard to the relevance of replicability to research evaluation. Replicability makes

⁶⁹ See, e.g., Lupia and Elman 2014.

⁷⁰ See report on research ethics (I.2), section III.

⁷¹ Report III.3, pp. 6-7.

⁷² See reports on "Epistemological and Ontological Priors: Varieties of Openness and Research Integrity" (I.1a) and "Epistemological and Ontological Priors: Explicating the Perils of Transparency" (I.1b).

⁷³ See report I.1b.

⁷⁴ See report I.1a, as well as a discussion in Parsons (2015).

sense as an evaluative standard from a hypothetico-deductive perspective in which social inquiry involves the use of evidence to falsify claims about observer-independent phenomena in the world. In this context, sharing data and analytic procedures aids assessment by facilitating some forms of verification and reanalysis. By contrast, enabling others to retrace the researcher's steps as part of an assessment of her conclusions makes little sense from a non-positivist perspective in which all scientific observation and interpretation is understood as mediated by the observer's point of view – by her theoretical presuppositions, her values, her position within societal power structures.⁷⁵

From the latter perspective, the evaluation of scholarly work and its findings does not turn on whether we can generate the same result via the same methods using the same evidence. Nor, for that matter, does assessment involve gauging whether research procedures might have biased results away from the "right" answer. Assessment in interpretivist and other non-positivist scholarship operates on a different set of logics. The QTD working group reports on non-positivist philosophies of knowledge and interpretive methods detail a wide range of alternative ways in which a theoretical explanation or interpretation may be assessed, depending on the methodology being employed and the logic of evidence and argument within which it operates.⁷⁶ Interpretivists seeking to evaluate an evidence-based claim might "interrogate existing categories, question how boundaries have been drawn between one phenomenon and another, challenge the 'operationalization' of terms, probe omissions and distortions, examine metaphors and analogies that structure understanding, develop new concepts, introduce new modes of argument, and appeal to different registers of experience"⁷⁷ – none of which involves asking how close the claim comes to an observer-independent truth. In the view of interpretivist participants in the QTD, the logics of, and prerequisites for, these diverse forms of scrutiny bear little relation to the notion of research transparency.

The Politics of Knowledge: QTD participants working in non-positivist research traditions, moreover, expressed grave concern about the longer-term political implications of the transparency agenda, especially insofar as it involves the articulation of new norms or even requirements by professional associations, editors, or funders. To the extent that transparency's conceptual underpinnings are consonant with some knowledge-production frameworks while being incompatible with others, its elevation as a broad standard, from this point of view, threatens to privilege some modes of analysis and marginalize others. The adverse consequences include "circumscribing the subject matter appropriate to 'science,' narrowing the range of analytic practices accredited as empirical inquiry, establishing problematic norms for assessing political inquiry, identifying basic principles of practice for political scientists, and validating one ethos for all scholars."⁷⁸ And allowing non-positivist approaches to simply register as an exception to broad transparency norms would, the interpretivist group argues, serve only to mistakenly mark these methodologies as intrinsically incapable of meeting disciplinary standards of research integrity.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ See, in particular, the reports on epistemological and ontological priors (I.1a and I.1b), as well as the reports on interpretive and ethnographic methods (III.2 and III.3).

⁷⁶ See reports I.1b and III.2.

⁷⁷ Report on interpretive methods (III.2), p. 2.

⁷⁸ Report on "Epistemological and Ontological Priors: Explicating the Perils of Transparency" (I.1b), p. 19. See also the report on interpretive methods (III.2).

⁷⁹ Report on interpretive methods (III.2), p. 7.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH PRACTICE

Each working group decided on its own whether to advance specific recommendations for research practice, depending on the degree of consensus within the relevant research communities, as well as the group's sense of the desirability of establishing transparency-related scholarly norms for their particular research community. Most reports stop short of articulating firm and specific rules. This choice emerged partly from the fact that, notwithstanding the QTD's differentiated structure, numerous groups were grappling with quite varied forms of research activity. For instance, scholars conducting research on authoritarian or repressive political regimes (the remit of working group IV.1) might employ a broad range of methodological approaches, which might warrant diverse openness practices.

Across the reports, two principal exceptions stand out against a general reluctance to promulgate rules. The working group on research ethics⁸⁰ distilled from its deliberations what it sees as a set of consensus principles for judgment- and decision-making at the interface between research transparency and human-subjects protection. Chief among these principles is the ethical primacy of researcher obligations to protect human participants, even when such protection must come at the cost of reduced transparency toward research audiences. The group also proposes "reflexive openness" as a generalized approach, calling on scholars continually to reflect on the ethical implications of their research activities; to engage and share information with human participants about aspects of the research that could affect them;⁸¹ and to provide reviewers, editors, and readers with a reasoned account of their ethical practices. The reflexive openness standard calls on editors, reviewers, and funders to evaluate researchers' decisions to share or withhold information and data based on these accounts, grounded in the nature and context of inquiry, while granting a high degree of deference to researchers' ethical judgments about whether and what to share.⁸²

The other document articulating a clear set of transparency criteria, with broad support across the community of practitioners, is the QCA report.⁸³ The report of this group, tasked with examining a single, well-defined method that operates via a relatively standardized procedure, itemizes specific aspects of the analytic process that ought always to be disclosed in QCA research – such as the method of calibration employed, cases' membership scores, and the decision rules used in truth table analysis.⁸⁴

In addition, even where they do not propose new transparency standards, a number of reports – such as, those on text-based sources, comparative methods and process tracing, and content analysis – outline relatively clear expectations about the kinds of information that scholars in a

⁸⁰ Report I.2.

⁸¹ The reports on research in violent settings (IV.2) and on research with marginalized/vulnerable populations (IV.3) similarly emphasize the importance of transparency toward research participants. The report on research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1) signals disagreement among scholars working in repressive settings around the wisdom of full candor with participants about research purposes and funding sources.

⁸² The report on research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1) similarly argues for a process of case-by-case editorial decision-making informed by conversation between editors and authors about transparency choices that might affect human participants.

⁸³ Report III.4.

⁸⁴ While the report notes disagreement among set-theoretic scholars on certain analytic issues, the authors report that there is no substantial disagreement on transparency matters.

given research tradition should generally seek to provide.⁸⁵ Further, most reports identify a wide range of practices that particular qualitative research communities consider to be valuable and achievable at reasonable cost. We itemize some of these practices later in this section.

Reading across individual reports, moreover, also reveals a number of key patterns. These include considerable consensus on the value of several forms of explicitness in qualitative research as well as two principal areas of disagreement.

To begin with the areas of disagreement, as implied by the earlier discussion of **epistemological and ontological perspectives**, there appears to be a fundamental divide between qualitative researchers who see value in at least some logics and practices of transparency, on the one hand, and qualitative researchers who reject the very concept of transparency as incompatible with their understanding of knowledge production, on the other hand.⁸⁶ This fault line seems to map to some degree onto the difference between broadly positivistic (or hypothetico-deductive) and interpretive modes of analysis – though the alignment is far from perfect. The ethnography working group, for instance, engaged in a wide-ranging exploration of the meaning of "openness" – a concept, arguably, not too distant from an expansive notion of transparency – in ethnographic research.⁸⁷ Moreover, several working groups with epistemologically diverse memberships registered support for multiple forms of transparency.⁸⁸ We would nonetheless identify as a key finding of the QTD exercise that *there exists no meta-standard of research transparency that can operate across all forms of evidence-based qualitative inquiry*.

The other main area of disagreement, even among research communities that embrace the overall value of research transparency, is the advisability of **data-sharing**. Importantly, there was *universal agreement that the sharing of qualitative data should not be uniformly required*, given the considerable costs and risks of data-sharing for some forms of research.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, qualitative research communities vary widely in the degree to which they view data-sharing as the presumptively appropriate practice. At one end of the spectrum, working groups III.4 and III.5 recommend that scholars using QCA and content analysis, respectively, make the qualitative source material used for such analyses accessible wherever ethical considerations, confidentiality agreements, and legal and copyright restrictions do not prohibit doing so. The groups on text-based sources and on comparative methods and process-tracing similarly argue in favor of sharing raw data to the extent that doing so is consistent with ethical obligations and feasible at reasonable cost. The text-based sources group further argues that, in most cases, it should not be too onerous for scholars to provide extended source excerpts to back up key claims, especially if scholars plan to do so from the outset of a research project. By contrast, groups focused on human-subjects research and higher-risk contexts (I.2, II.2, IV.2, and IV.3), while recognizing intellectual value in sharing some evidentiary materials, argue against any default practice of data-sharing and in favor of great caution in considering the implications of this strategy for human participants and their

⁸⁵ Reports II.1, III.1, and III.5.

⁸⁶ Indeed, it is this deep divide that led the working group on epistemological and ontological priors (I.1) to the decision to produce two, separate reports.

⁸⁷ See report III.3.

⁸⁸ See, for instance, the working groups on evidence from research with human participants (II.2) and on research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1), in settings of political violence (IV.2), and with vulnerable/marginalized populations (IV.3). Each of these groups was composed both of scholars who do interpretive research and of scholars who work in a more positivist vein.

⁸⁹ The groups that took the strongest position on data-sharing are the QCA group (III.4) and the content analysis group (III.5), but they advocate a general data-sharing expectation only when the data take quantitative form.

communities. Their reports also point readers to selective forms of access, such as the reproduction of extended excerpts, as a more practicable form of ethical data-sharing than the posting of full (anonymized) transcripts or field notes. Finally, both the ethnography group (for epistemological and ethical reasons) and the authoritarian-contexts group (for ethical reasons) take strong positions against sharing original or "raw" data of any kind. It is thus difficult to identify a single data-sharing principle or presumptive expectation that would be understood as workable for all evidence-based qualitative research.

Beyond deliberating the merits and risks of data-sharing, the working groups also draw attention to and propose a number of *concrete strategies* through which researchers and scholarly communities can advance the credibility and evaluability of empirical qualitative claims without abrogating ethical obligations. Among these are:

- when quoting from a response to an interview question, sharing the *complete* response in order to provide wider context, while minimizing the deidentification challenges involved in sharing an entire transcript;⁹⁰
- where transcripts cannot be shared, reporting the number of interviews consistent and inconsistent with a proposed hypothesis;⁹¹ and
- the use of Annotation for Transparent Inquiry, a technology developed by the Qualitative Data Repository at Syracuse University, that allows researchers to layer a citation, analytical note, source excerpt, and possible link to a source over the relevant passage in the article text.⁹²

The text-based sources group argues, further, that scholars should routinely provide sufficient information about the location of publicly available sources to ensure that others can find them, and should specify the particular parts of any source that are being drawn upon (e.g., by including page numbers).⁹³ These are practices likely to be valued widely by political science researchers, regardless of methodological or epistemological orientation.

We also see broad, explicit agreement among qualitative research communities about the importance of several general forms of openness. We note again, in this context, that some qualitative research communities grounded in interpretivist or non-positivist epistemologies reject the concepts of research transparency, openness, and explicitness from first principles.⁹⁴ The discussion here thus focuses on those groups whose deliberations did not center on a fundamental critique of transparency as a frame for thinking about research communication:

- **Transparency about generating evidence.** Across a wide range of qualitative research traditions, *there is a clear consensus on the vital importance of providing readers with detailed accounts of how the evidence used in a study was generated.* QTD groups specify in their reports what this involves for their type of research, provide numerous examples,

⁹⁰ See report on research in violent settings (IV.2).

⁹¹ See report on research in violent settings (IV.2).

⁹² See report on text-based sources (II.1). The report on evidence from research with human participants (II.2) similarly points to hyperlinked citations accompanied by source documents as a potentially useful approach to data-sharing when used with due attention to human subjects protection concerns.

⁹³ See report on text-based sources (II.1).

⁹⁴ See, especially, reports on "Epistemological and Ontological Priors: Explicating the Perils of Transparency" (I.1b) and on Interpretive Methods (III.2).

and point to a large number of published works that pursue this form of explicitness effectively.⁹⁵ Working groups also identify a substantial number of specific practices, both commonplace and innovative, in this domain and make a number of novel proposals for how this form of transparency might be advanced. The reports suggest, for instance, that transparency about the generation of evidence might imply:

- providing information not just about the production of evidence that they themselves generated but also about the origins of sources that pre-date the study, such as textual materials, making explicit the scholar's critical use of his/her sources;⁹⁶
- sharing the questionnaires used and/or the question asked when using responses as evidence;⁹⁷
- providing an interview table containing key metadata for all interviews conducted;⁹⁸
- reporting divergences between planned and actual data-collection processes;⁹⁹
- specifying, for small-n analysis, what was known about the cases at the time of their selection and/or identify those cases that were almost chosen for analysis but ultimately not included;¹⁰⁰
- recording and posting deliberations about coding choices for content-analytic work;¹⁰¹ and
- providing the above kinds of information in a dedicated appendix if space constraints or readability considerations do not allow for inclusion in the main text.¹⁰²

At the same time, the report on research ethics¹⁰³ makes clear that transparency about evidence-generation is not without potential complications: as noted above, in some contexts, a detailed account of fieldwork sites might be sufficient for well-informed actors to identify participants or their communities.

- **Transparency about analytic process.** We observe similarly *broad agreement among qualitative scholars on the importance of explicitness about analytic processes.*¹⁰⁴ Again, the particular form that this type of transparency may take varies across research approaches. Among the specific practices discussed in the reports are:
 - explaining how particularities of case context or background knowledge shape the interpretation of evidence;¹⁰⁵

⁹⁵ This includes explicit discussion of the value of this form of transparency in reports II.1, II.2, III.1, III.3, III.5, IV.1, IV.2, and IV.3. The issue was of little relevance to the QCA group's deliberations (III.4) as these were focused strictly on a specific set of analytic algorithms.

⁹⁶ See report on text-based sources (II.1).

⁹⁷ See report on evidence from research with human participants (II.2).

⁹⁸ See report on evidence from research with human participants (II.2). See also Bleich and Pekkanen, 2013.

⁹⁹ Ibid and report on research with vulnerable/marginalized populations (IV.3).

¹⁰⁰ See report on comparative methods and process tracing (III.1).

¹⁰¹ See report on content analysis (III.5).

¹⁰² See reports on text-based sources (II.1), evidence from research with human participants (II.2), comparative methods and process tracing (III.1), ethnography (III.3), and research in authoritarian contexts (IV.1). See also Kapiszewski, Maclean, and Read, p. 392.

¹⁰³ I.2.

¹⁰⁴ Explicit discussion of the importance of this form of transparency features in reports II.1, II.2, III.1, III.3, III.4, IV.1, IV.2, and IV.3.

¹⁰⁵ See reports on comparative methods and process tracing (III.1) and authoritarian contexts (IV.1).

- noting the steps taken to challenge one’s own premises or early hunches in the course of a project;¹⁰⁶
 - reporting when initial hypotheses were dropped or modified – or when new hypotheses were developed – in light of the evidence;¹⁰⁷
 - explicitness about whether an analysis aims for generalization beyond the cases being examined;¹⁰⁸ and
 - for some methodologies, formally modeling or explicitly mapping the links between evidence and inference.¹⁰⁹
- **Transparency about risks to human participants/communities.** Across the groups focused on research involving human participants, there was broad agreement and emphasis on the value of researchers conveying to their audiences what risks their interlocutors faced as a result of participation in the research, what information was or was not shared with participants, and what steps the researcher took to protect them and their communities.¹¹⁰
 - **Transparency toward human participants.** Most groups focused on human-subject-oriented research likewise identified transparency toward human participants as foundational to ethical scholarly practice.¹¹¹
 - **Openness about researcher positionality and researcher subjectivity.** While the concepts have not featured prominently in discussions of research transparency in political science, all QTD reports focused on research with human participants highlight the value of explicit discussions of how scholars' positionality and subjectivity might have shaped their interactions in the field or their interpretations of the evidence.¹¹² And while such reflexivity is often associated with interpretive research, positivist scholarship would similarly benefit from such discussion insofar as researcher positionality might bias survey or interview responses.¹¹³

Alongside these areas of broad, explicit agreement, we also note that there was no disagreement about – though also less discussion of – the value of two other forms of transparency: transparency about research goals and transparency about conflicts of interest. The ethnography group elaborates a strong case for explicit discussion of what a piece of research aims to explain, explore, or uncover.¹¹⁴ The importance of transparency about potential conflicts of interest features prominently in the report on research in violent settings,¹¹⁵ and in cross-group conversations there

¹⁰⁶ See report on ethnography (III.3).

¹⁰⁷ See reports on QCA (III.4) and research in violent settings (IV.2). The report on comparative methods and process tracing (III.1) also points to debates about whether the sequence in which hypotheses were developed and evidence examined is of analytical relevance; see also Fairfield and Charman (2019). On challenges of integrating deduction and induction in process tracing, see Hall (2013, esp. pp.26-28).

¹⁰⁸ See report on comparative methods and process tracing (III.1)

¹⁰⁹ See report on comparative methods and process tracing (III.1).

¹¹⁰ See reports I.2, II.2, III.3, IV.1, IV.2, and IV.3.

¹¹¹ See reports I.2, IV.1, IV.2, IV.3.

¹¹² See reports I.2, II.2, III.3, IV.1, IV.2, and IV.3.

¹¹³ Report on research in violent settings (IV.2).

¹¹⁴ Report III.3. See also the report on evidence from research with human participants (II.2) and research in violent settings (IV.2).

¹¹⁵ Report IV.2.

appeared to be a wide consensus on the desirability of such explicitness. Further, the interpretive methods working group proposed turning the demand for transparency on the profession itself, by interrogating scholars' often-unstated ideological presumptions, such as a belief in science as a method for uncovering objective truths and a commitment to preserving liberalism.¹¹⁶

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDITORS, REVIEWERS, FUNDERS, AND PROFESSIONAL BODIES

For the most part, the QTD, and this overview essay, have been focused on questions confronting researchers. Yet, journal editors and publishers, reviewers, funding agencies, and professional associations also need to grapple with the rationale for, costs and limits of, and practicalities of making scholarship transparent. What do the outcomes of the QTD process mean for their policies and practices?

The QTD was not intended to, and did not, culminate in the elaboration of a set of qualitative transparency rules that journals, presses, or other professional bodies might adopt. The challenge of identifying common expectations or criteria for qualitative scholarship is vastly more complex than for quantitative work, given the tremendously variegated nature of evidentiary forms and logics of inquiry involved. This is true even *within* most research traditions. As the reports make clear, there are too many ways of understanding and doing ethnography, for instance, or process tracing to itemize a comprehensive set of conditional openness procedures that researchers ought to undertake. QTD participants also drew attention to the time-bound nature of scholarly expectations: research methodologies are a focus of ongoing innovation, and practices considered normative today may come to be seen as inadequate or problematic tomorrow.

At the same time, as the discussion in the foregoing section makes clear, the deliberations do suggest several general types of information that it is reasonable for editors, reviewers, and funders to look for in most qualitative empirical research outputs. In particular, *it appears broadly agreed across most qualitative communities that it is fair to expect authors to provide considerable information about (1) how the evidence was generated, (2) how the analysis was conducted, and (3) how risks to human participants were managed.*

When it comes to data-sharing, the paramount message from the deliberations is that *it calls for differentiated judgment, rather than a general obligation to share the maximum amount of materials.* It calls for considering what precisely would be gained by asking an author to share their source materials; how much needs to be shared in order to reap these gains; what risks such sharing might pose to those whom the researcher may have an ethical obligation to protect; and how time-consuming and costly it would be for the author to make the source materials meaningfully accessible to others.¹¹⁷ To a great degree, the gains to data-sharing will depend on the methodology underpinning a given study. Providing readers with access to at least parts of the underlying evidentiary record is considered beneficial to understanding and assessment for a number of qualitative approaches, including QCA, content analysis, and process tracing. On the other hand, the idea of sharing one's "data" is not an intellectually coherent notion for ethnographers or practitioners of other interpretive methods.

¹¹⁶ See report III.2.

¹¹⁷ See Saunders 2014; Snyder 2014.

Moreover, as the working group on research ethics points out, editors must, in making data-sharing requests of authors, also take into account the steep informational and ethical asymmetry between editor and author. It will generally be the author who has the firmest grasp of the potential harms that might arise from the disclosure of information, given the particularities of the research context; and it is, ultimately, the author who has incurred the moral obligation to protect participants. While authors should be required to justify their choices about whether or not and what to share, their reasoned arguments on this matter should receive strong deference. Moreover, editors, funding agencies, and reviewers ought to avoid even the appearance that compromising on those ethical obligations is expected or might improve publication or funding prospects, lest researchers feel pressured either to cut ethical corners or to avoid studying sensitive topics altogether.¹¹⁸ Likewise, the ethics group calls for revising the APSA Ethics Guide¹¹⁹ to vest the individual researcher with primary responsibility for managing the ethical dilemmas confronted by her scholarship.

Further, for those concerned about evaluability in the absence of data-sharing, the QTD Reports creatively suggest a number of alternative ways in which authors might be reasonably asked to shore up the credibility of their claims, from providing more extended excerpts or furnishing meta-data and interview protocols to constructing summaries of the balance of evidence or adducing corroborating clues in publicly available sources.

Finally, the QTD reports may serve as a resource for editors or funders seeking to further develop evaluative criteria that are appropriate to the form of evidence, logic of inquiry, and research context that a study involves. While the remainder of this symposium is comprised of summaries of the 14 reports, each is linked to the full report, posted as an online supplement. We encourage readers to delve into these full reports, which are a rich source of information about the key considerations that ought to factor into transparency decisions in particular research situations – and an excellent guide to the kinds of questions that editors and reviewers ought to be asking. More broadly, the reports represent articulations of the considered understandings of research openness held by a wide range of qualitative research communities. They can thus help ensure that assessments of qualitative research *make sense* within the intellectual traditions in which authors are operating.

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¹¹⁸ This principle is most clearly articulated in the ethics group's report (I.2).

¹¹⁹ The Guide does not explicitly lodge this responsibility with any actor, though in stating that "[s]cholars may be exempted" from transparency requirements, it seems to imply that the decision to grant or not grant the exemption lies with an actor other than the researcher-author, such as the journal editor. See, specifically, clause 6.4. APSA Committee on Professional Ethics, Rights and Freedoms (2012).

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