

Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

Proposal to the APSA's QMMR Organized Section
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[Approved by the QMMR Section Executive Committee, 20 Dec 2015]

Background

- At its 2015 business meeting, the APSA's Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research unanimously passed a motion to initiate a process of deliberation over transparency in qualitative research. The motion tasked Tim Büthe and Alan Jacobs, building on the [symposium they edited in the Spring 2015 issue of the QMMR Newsletter](#), with drawing up and putting before the section membership a proposal for a deliberative process about the meaning and practicalities of research transparency for the many research traditions represented in the QMMR section.
- Efforts to enhance research transparency have gained increasing prominence across the natural and social sciences. As a "meta-standard," research transparency is broadly valued among political scientists for a variety of reasons, including: aiding the understanding and assessment of researchers' findings and interpretations; easing the communication of ideas across diverse scholarly communities; facilitating the accumulation of knowledge; and enhancing the credibility and usefulness of empirical social research to policy practitioners.

However, the meaning of research transparency and how it ought to be operationalized is not self-evident and is likely to vary widely across different forms of research. The meaning, the costs and benefits, and the practicalities of transparency will be different for students of politics than for scholars of other subject matters. They may also be different for qualitative and interpretive, as compared to quantitative and algorithmic, forms of analysis; and different for different types of qualitative and interpretive inquiry.

- Open and careful deliberation over the value, costs, risks, and practicalities of research openness for *specific* forms of qualitative political-science scholarship is necessary to help ensure that evolving expectations and practices of transparency in the discipline reflect the distinctive features of different approaches to social inquiry: their distinctive intellectual premises, the differing research contexts in which scholars operate, the diverse types of observation and evidence on which they draw, and the multiple forms of analysis in which researchers engage.
- We propose that the QMMR Organized Section lead a deliberative process over the meaning, value, and practice of transparency for different forms of qualitative empirical research in political science, which we herein call the Qualitative Transparency Deliberations, or QTD. QMMR may undertake these deliberations in cooperation with other organized sections whose members have a large investment in qualitative research (as detailed below).

Outputs and Objectives

- **Outputs:** The proposal envisions deliberations that will be organized by forms of qualitative inquiry or types of issues that arise in qualitative research. The organizing principles for the differentiated substantive discussions are to be defined during a first stage of the deliberative process. The deliberations might be organized, for example, around distinct forms of qualitative analysis, different types of qualitative evidence, and differing contexts of field research. Disaggregating the deliberations will allow discussion of particular forms of inquiry to be undertaken by scholars who regularly engage in those kinds of research. Thus, for instance, deliberations over transparency in interpretive ethnography would be undertaken by interpretive ethnographers, deliberations over fieldwork in contexts of political violence would be held among those conducting fieldwork in contexts of political violence, and so on. Each set of deliberations will culminate in the production of a text – a Community Transparency Statement (CTS) – that reflects current understandings of transparency within a particular research community.

The Community Transparency Statements will likely vary in their degree of prescriptiveness and in the degree of consensus that they reflect. Yet all documents will (a) provide one or more conceptualizations of research transparency appropriate to the form of research being considered; (b) identify common and best practices of transparency for this form of research; and (c) identify costs and benefits of these transparency practices for researchers and research audiences. While some Community Transparency Statements might articulate relatively clear transparency norms or standards around which the working group has identified broad consensus, other Community Transparency Statements might identify a range of perspectives among or within the relevant research communities and identify both areas of convergence and areas of divergence across those perspectives.

- **Objectives:** Differentiated, bottom-up articulations of the meaning and practices of research transparency for various forms of qualitative research would simultaneously advance several important objectives:
 - **Informing editorial policies and practices:** Over the last several months, many political scientists have expressed deep concern about the implementation of DA-RT (Data Access and Research Transparency) principles, as articulated in the October 2014 Journal Editors' Transparency Statement (JETS, previously known as "the DA-RT Statement"). A key concern is that journals might implement new data access and transparency requirements that are not compatible with the diversity of epistemological assumptions and logics of inquiry that are at work in the discipline and/or with the ethical, legal, and practical constraints under which many qualitative researchers operate. Such a development would be undesirable because it would disadvantage qualitative as compared to quantitative work in the publication process (and, possibly, disadvantage some forms of qualitative work more than others) and thus create a disincentive for political scientists to undertake (some forms of) qualitative research.

Moreover, there are numerous open questions about how to achieve transparency in various forms of qualitative inquiry. Key questions include what analytic transparency entails for non-statistical forms of analysis; how to achieve transparency while meeting ethical and legal obligations to protect human subjects; how to take into account the costs associated with archiving some forms of qualitative evidence; and what "data access" means for research communities that understand empirical social research as an intrinsically relational and intersubjective (rather than data-extractive) activity.

As the output of an inclusive deliberative process among qualitative researchers, the envisioned Community Transparency Statements (CTSs) could provide crucial guidance to journal editors and editorial boards seeking to articulate guidelines for authors and reviewers that are appropriate to diverse forms of qualitative inquiry, and that are viewed as relevant and reasonable by those research communities. Such guidance will be valuable not only to editors who have committed themselves to DA-RT implementation, but also to editors who have declined to commit to DA-RT yet nonetheless seek to promote research transparency in a manner consistent with the discipline's intellectual pluralism.

- **Informing research design and practices:** A carefully differentiated discussion of the value, meaning, and practice of research transparency in different forms of qualitative research should be beneficial for professional activities well beyond journal publication. The envisioned Community Transparency Statements will become a valuable collective resource for researchers seeking to navigate the challenges of making their research as transparent as possible as they design and carry out their research projects. The envisioned Community Transparency Statements will, for instance, provide analyses of both the costs and the benefits of different ways of realizing research transparency, allowing researchers to make more informed choices. In addition to raising awareness of the context-specific risks of some transparency practices, the CTSs will also identify innovative and effective ways of minimizing those risks or reducing the costs of research transparency. Further, the Statements addressing research with human subjects will provide important guidance to scholars seeking to engage with study participants with maximal respect and openness.
- **Training in qualitative methods:** Community Transparency Statements – in identifying and evaluating transparency practices in various forms of qualitative research, and in discussing the choices and dilemmas that researchers face in pursuing openness – will serve as valuable pedagogical resources for the training of graduate students in research design and methods. The CTSs should also prove useful for more advanced scholars seeking to learn new qualitative research tools or methods.

DELIBERATIVE PROCESS

We propose a two-stage deliberative process, following the appointment of a Steering Committee to guide the proceedings. The first stage of the process will focus on identifying the dimensions along which we must differentiate when discussing research transparency. The second stage will involve substantive deliberations over research transparency, differentiated along the identified dimensions. The second stage will be driven forward by a set of working groups, constituted based on the input received during the first stage, each dedicated to considering transparency issues as they arise for a particular form of research. Each working group will be comprised of political scientists with experience in the aspects of qualitative and multi-method research under discussion, and each group will invite input from, and consult with, a broad range of scholars. All dates indicated below are approximate.

Steering Committee

Jan. 15 - Jan. 31, 2016

- **Appointment:** The process will begin with the appointment of a Steering Committee to guide the deliberations. Peter Hall, as QMMR Organized Section President, upon consultation with the other section officers, will appoint 7-9 scholars to serve for up to one year on the Steering Committee. Between them, the members of the Steering Committee should have research experience using a diverse set of qualitative methods – such as process tracing, ethnography, interpretive methods, comparative historical analysis, interview-based research, archival work, and algorithmic forms of qualitative analysis. But individual members will not serve as representatives for particular constituencies; instead, the Steering Committee will be designed to be broadly representative of QMMR scholarship. The members of the Steering Committee will include at least one member who is junior (pre-tenure) and one who is teaching at an institution that is not a Ph.D.-granting research university.
- **Responsibilities:** The Steering Committee's responsibilities will be to:
 - structure and moderate the at-large consultation;
 - select, delineate, and coordinate the substantive foci of the Working Groups, based on the input received during the at-large consultation;
 - appoint Working Group members;
 - provide an initial set of common structuring questions and thus a common framework to help guide and coordinate Working Group deliberations;
 - oversee the timely progress of the Working Groups;
 - facilitate conversation, where helpful, across Working Groups on issues of common interest; and
 - provide feedback on interim Working Group drafts (see below).

The QMMR Section President may appoint one or two members of the Steering Committee to (co)chair the committee. The President also may appoint new members

if vacancies arise on the committee and may re-appoint the members of the committee should the section decide that the process should be extended beyond the initial 1-year appointment. The Steering Committee will seek to make decisions by consensus but if necessary can make decisions with a vote of a majority of its members.

Stage 1: At-Large Consultations

Feb. 1 – 29, 2016

- **Online Consultation of the Section Membership At-Large:** In Stage 1, the full QMMR section membership will be invited to participate in an at-large, online consultation over how to structure the substantive deliberations. While comments submitted during this stage may in principle address any aspect of research transparency in political science, the Steering Committee will at this stage primarily seek comments about the forms and aspects of qualitative research that require separate substantive discussions. The categories used to structure the symposium about research transparency in the Spring 2015 issue of *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* – types of evidence, forms of analysis, and social settings in which empirical engagement unfolds – might serve as initial categories for this consultation, but the process during this stage will be open to any and all suggestions for structuring the substantive discussion.

Comments at this stage might also articulate dilemmas or challenges that qualitative researchers face in pursuing transparency and that warrant substantive discussion.

The online consultation platform will allow anyone to submit a comment. Comments will generally be posted on the QTD web portal without edits or delay, provided that comments observe norms of civility and professionalism. Commenters will be encouraged to identify themselves by name and affiliation, but a mechanism will also be made available for posting comments without publicly identifying oneself.

- Participation in the online consultation process will be open, including to scholars who are not members of the QMMR section. QMMR will work to encourage participation by members of other APSA organized sections with a large stake in qualitative methods.

March 1 - 15, 2016

- **Selection of Working-Group Foci:** The Steering Committee will review the input received through the online consultations and, informed by these comments, will select a set of foci for the substantive deliberations. As suggested above, these foci are likely to be organized according to the different dimensions along which qualitative research projects vary.¹

¹ Possible foci of deliberation might, for instance, include transparency in the use of interview responses, as a form of evidence raising distinct sets of practical issues and concerns for scholars seeking transparency;

For each identified focus, a Working Group (WG) will be appointed to consult and deliberate about research transparency issues as they relate to the kind or aspect of research that is the focus of the WG's work. In total, approximately 15 WGs will be formed, each comprised of 3 scholars who regularly engage in the kind of research that is the WG's focus.

In the course of the Qualitative Transparency Deliberation, each Working Group will write a text that summarizes the understandings of research transparency of the researchers who have participated in the deliberations over the aspects or kinds of qualitative research within the Working Group's focus. While the structure and content of these Community Transparency Statements will be decided upon as the process unfolds, we expect that each CTS will identify the perceived needs and benefits of transparency for a particular form or aspect of qualitative research; point to prevailing and "best" transparency practices within the relevant research communities; and discuss the costs, risks, tradeoffs, and practicalities that the pursuit of transparency in this research domain entails.

March 16 – April 15, 2016

- **Working Group Appointments:** Steering Committee recruits WG members, appointing to each WG scholars who regularly engage in the kind of research or with the transparency issue that is the WG's focus. In appointing the members of the WGs, the Steering Committee will aim to achieve diversity in scholars' professional circumstances, including career stage and type of institution. Liaison representatives from other relevant APSA organized sections will be asked to advise the Steering Committee on the appointment of WG members and to offer input and advice along the way.
- **Steering Committee Guidance:** The Steering Committee will provide the Working Groups with an initial set of common guiding questions. These questions are not intended to be exhaustive of the issues that a WG might consider, but will be designed to ensure a degree of commonality and comparability across the deliberations, while respecting the WGs' differentiated mandates. Guiding questions might, for instance, encourage the WGs to identify the features of research (of the kind that a given WG is examining) about which it is most important to be transparent; to identify current prevailing or "best" practices; to point to possible ways in which transparency practices might be improved; and to identify important benefits, costs, risks, and tradeoffs confronted by researchers conducting this form of research in pursuing transparency.

another focus might be research in settings of political violence, as a research context raising distinct transparency issues; yet another focus might be transparency in interpretive inquiry, as a form of analysis characterized by its own logic of transparency.

Stage 2: Working Group-Based Differentiated Deliberations

April 16 – June 15, 2016

- **Working Group Consultations with Research Communities:** For at least two months, the Working Groups will consult widely with scholars in their research communities. The WGs will gather broad input from relevant research communities on the guiding questions as well as other issues identified by the WG as warranting discussion.

Working Group consultations with interested research communities will take two forms: open online deliberation, similar in form to the consultation carried out during the first stage, during which all scholars are invited to participate in substantive discussions of research transparency within differentiated research communities; and the active solicitation of input from colleagues with experience in the use of the qualitative methods or in dealing with the particular issues that are the focus of a particular Working Group.

Throughout the deliberations, Working Groups will review the input received. Working remotely, they will begin to identify areas of agreement, areas of disagreement, key considerations, tradeoffs, and open questions that have surfaced during their consultations.

Mid-June

- **Steering Committee and Working Group Meeting 1.** Funding permitting,² the Steering Committee and Working Groups will meet. At this meeting, WGs will work individually to begin to outline their Community Transparency Statements. The WGs and Steering Committee will also meet jointly to identify and discuss areas of agreement, areas of tension, and common themes emerging across WG deliberations. The possibility of a common structure for the Community Transparency Statements may be further explored during this meeting.

June 15 - Aug 15, 2016

- WGs work remotely on draft texts. During this period, WG will post an interim draft of the Community Transparency Statements online and allow a period of at least 2 weeks for online comment from relevant research communities.

APSA 2016

- **Steering Committee and Working Group Meeting 2.** Funding permitting,³ WGs meet on the day prior to the start of the APSA's 2016 Annual Meeting to consider

² Should the Steering Committee be unable to secure funding for the planned in-person meeting, the work and discussions described here will take place remotely (likely, online).

³ As with Meeting 1, these discussions will take place online if funds to bring WG and Steering Committee members together pre-APSA cannot be secured.

feedback received on draft Community Transparency Statements and to work on revisions. The WGs and Steering Committee will also jointly convene for further discussion of areas of agreement, divergence, and common themes across the emerging drafts and to consider further coordination on a parallel structure across Statements.

At APSA 2016, WG members might present provisional texts at roundtables. The Steering Committee will report back to the QMMR Section on the progress of the deliberations at the section business meeting.

Oct. 15, 2016

- WGs finalize the Community Transparency Statements. Each Working Group will have ultimate discretion over the content of its Community Transparency Statement. CTSs will be posted online on the QTD Web Portal. The Portal may be designed to allow for further comments on the CTSs and ongoing deliberation.
- The Community Transparency Statements will reflect the outcome of extended and inclusive deliberations among diverse qualitative research communities. As a consequence, these texts will likely vary in their degree of prescriptiveness, depending on the nature of the working groups' deliberations and degree of consensus: Some CTSs may take the form of specific transparency standards or guidelines; others may raise considerations or questions that those undertaking or assessing a given type of research should ask, including costs and benefits of being transparent about specific aspects of the kind of research under consideration, or of being transparent in particular ways; others might delineate tradeoffs, ambiguities, and lines of disagreement over the meaning and practicalities of transparency for a given mode of inquiry. Each Community Transparency Statement will also report the degree of heterogeneity of views among the participants in a given Working Group's deliberations.

What the Community Transparency Statements will have in common, however, is that each will seek to articulate the (possibly multiple) *understandings of research transparency that are current among scholars undertaking a given form of qualitative research*. Each WG will also strive to produce a text that will be a useful resource for designing and conducting research, for teaching graduate students, and for evaluating research outputs. We also imagine that the Community Transparency Statements produced through this process will, ultimately, be tentative in nature, and may be revised as understandings, norms, practices, and debates evolve.