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Research data and methods policy update for the *Journal of Human Rights*

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Since Shareen Hertel and Catherine Buerger assumed the mantle of editorial team for the *Journal of Human Rights* (*JHR*) in 2013, they have worked closely with our Editorial Board and with our Associate Editor Richard P. Hiskes and myself (former Managing Editor, now data consultant to *JHR*) to expand the methodological range and disciplinary scope of work published in *JHR*. One outcome of these efforts is the policy change we formally introduce in this issue — namely, the decision to require that authors employing quantitative data and regression modeling techniques in articles published in *JHR* also submit a replication file and description to a public data portal we have created. Indeed, an excellent piece of scholarship by Abouharb and Payne (featured in this issue) uses quantitative methods with replication data shared through our new system.

Our reasons for instituting this new policy flow from two major goals. The first is to offer scholars who engage in quantitative research on human rights the opportunity to more effectively use the many wonderful contributions to *JHR*. Doing so not only reflects the reality that knowledge production is a cumulative endeavor but also helps raise the profile of human rights scholarship being published in *JHR* and more generally. A second related goal is to offer scholars a more collaborative space where they can work together to develop more varied and novel approaches to studying human rights issues in an interdisciplinary way. Both of these goals fit with part of our mission statement to “broaden the study of human rights by fostering the critical re-examination of existing approaches to human rights, as well as developing new perspectives on the theory and practice of human rights” (*JHR* 2016). In this article introducing our publicly available quantitative data portal and the corresponding new submission requirement for scholars using this type of data, I will address both of these goals. I will also lay out our interpretation of the meaning of this decision as it relates to larger debates over data accessibility and research transparency among scholars in the humanities and social sciences.

There is already a relatively large quantity of excellent quantitative work on human rights. Most notably, measures of state respect for human rights like the Political Terror Scale (Gibney et al. 2012) and the Cingranelli and Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Data Project (Cingranelli and Richards 2010) are used to explore a wide range of factors that influence the protection and promotion of human rights from trade agreements, globalization, and state

capacity to regime type and ratification of human rights treaties. As the co-creator of the CIRI Human Rights Data Project, David L. Richards, argues:

Having measures for all human rights is important for a couple of reasons. First, in particular times and places a particular right or type of right might assume great importance or attention. This means that information about a wide variety of rights is necessary to properly study and understand human rights worldwide. This also assumes an element of continuity, in that we must not ignore the study of issues of a particular place/time due to lack of adequate measurements. Second, human rights do not exist in isolation of one another—they are interdependent—and fully understanding any one type of right requires an understanding of other types of rights. (2007: 38)

Measurement is important, and *JHR* routinely publishes work by authors who develop novel measures and approaches of their own that advance our knowledge about patterns of human rights performance around the world, drawing on quantitative data. This has included articles on the influence of state capacity (Young 2009), human rights treaties (Englehart and Miller 2014), the media (Apodaca 2007), foreign aid (Wood 2014), and military intervention (Bell et al. 2013) on human rights.

Still, despite this growing body of quantitative scholarship on human rights, large gaps remain. As noted in a piece by the current editor of *JHR* nearly a decade ago, economic rights remain “the poor step-sister to other types of human rights research, scholarship, and advocacy” (Hertel 2006: 223). This lesser status is due, in no small part, to the lack of adequate measures of economic rights. Despite the passage of time and much progress, I would argue this is still the case. Certainly, important work on the study of economic rights is being done, some of which has appeared in the pages of *JHR* such as the unveiling of the Social and Economic Rights Fulfillment (SERF) index (Fakuda-Parr et al. 2009; Randolph et al. 2010). However, the number and scale of measures of economic rights still pale in comparison to those available for civil and political rights. Some even argue that this lack of quantitative measures on economic rights leads to systematic bias among human rights scholars, policy-makers, and activists in favor of civil and political rights over economic ones — a serious issue if rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly 1948) are to be considered interdependent and indivisible. This lack of quantitative work on economic rights, then, is a problem that numerous scholars of human rights argue should be high on our list of priorities to address.

Given *JHR*’s role as an interdisciplinary venue for scholarship on human rights, the editorial team sought a way to make quantitative work more accessible to past and future contributors. Numerous scholars and institutions have attempted to assemble clearinghouse-like sites for data in their particular discipline or subfield. However, given that human rights is inherently interdisciplinary, *JHR* is ideally situated to start this process of building a more central space where authors can come for data on a variety of human rights subjects. Like other journals and numerous scholars in a variety of disciplines, we opted to create a *JHR* Dataverse portal hosted by the Harvard Dataverse Project. This system is user friendly and experiences large amounts of traffic from academics all over the world. Indeed, we reached out to contributors of quantitative work previously published in *JHR* to share their replication datasets and we are happy to say that nearly all who still had access to their files were willing to share them with us. This makes us hopeful that we can advance our second goal mentioned above of creating a collaborative space for human rights scholars to come together and to build on each other’s work. Again, we are particularly hopeful that scholars

will continue to work across disciplines to gain traction in areas long neglected in the field of human rights.

Our second goal, to create a more collaborative space for human rights scholars seeking to engage in a conversation in *JHR*, means we now require as a condition of acceptance that authors who use quantitative methods contribute replication files to the Dataverse portal (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jhr>). The reason for this requirement is to ensure that all authors who publish in *JHR* using quantitative approaches contribute fully to an ongoing conversation in this area within the field. We intend to work in concert with our contributors to ensure that only appropriate materials are included in the Dataverse site. *JHR* has no intention of creating a parallel system for submission of qualitative data as a condition of publication, given the very distinct norms and risks in that area of the field.

Indeed, we are committed to ensuring that sensitive work is not jeopardized by this new policy. Our goal is to enhance scholarly exchange and collaboration and not to stifle it because of concerns over privacy and/or the security of the subjects and creators of pieces of human rights scholarship. The issues of privacy and security are raised especially by those employing methods based on interviews and ethnography or any number of other research traditions (Parkinson and Wood 2015). The nature of much of this research involves telling the very personal stories of those living through the aftermath of extreme violations of human rights or stories of those who are actively experiencing ongoing and deepening violations. The safety and security of these subjects is a paramount concern and they are at risk if the researcher cannot guarantee anonymity — hence our decision not to create new requirements related to data-sharing in the realm of qualitative data. There is little doubt that, without scholarship employing qualitative approaches, our knowledge of the causes and consequences of different human rights practices would be greatly impoverished.

At this point, I would be remiss if I did not raise more general critiques of sharing data and discussions around replication requirements, currently a hot topic in all of academia. In fact, as many of our contributors from political science will surely note, the timing of *JHR*'s policy decision turned out to be fortuitous (or unfortunate depending on your perspective!) given the current joint statement by numerous highly ranked political science journals called the “Data Access & Research Joint Transparency Statement” (or statement on “DA-RT” for short) (DA-RT Statement, 2014). *JHR*'s move to require sharing of replication data for quantitative articles should not be seen to represent an endorsement of the entirety of the DA-RT statement. Indeed, our decision to pursue the creation of a quantitative data portal and related submission requirements was purely coincidental, as we moved in this direction independent of the DA-RT initiative.

My hope is that readers of this piece note that “transparency,” while an admirable and important goal — particularly given recent high-profile examples of data fabrication, data errors, or simply the inability to replicate previous findings — is not listed among our two goals for the new policy.¹

Our policy shift at *JHR* is much less about transparency and “catching mistakes” than it is about collaboration and raising the profile of human rights scholarship. In fact, given the type of interdisciplinary work that is necessary for human rights scholarship to thrive, it is hard to ignore some of the problems inherent in the DA-RT approach. Foremost among these concerns is the view of many critics of DA-RT, who argue that that the ever-building push for purportedly “objective standards” of what makes rigorous, sound, and quality scholarship risks excluding a wide range of approaches to knowledge creation in social

science (and in the human rights field, in particular). This issue is described at length in a persuasive piece by Pachirat (2015) who argues that the underlying logic of the DA-RT guidelines is fundamentally at odds with the ontology of “thick” interpretive approaches, such as ethnography — a central approach used by scholars published in *JHR* over the years (Hamber and Wilson 2002; Scheper-Hughes 2003; Theidon 2007; Sanford 2008; Ferllini and Croft 2009; Willen 2012; Millar 2015). As Pachirat puts it, the pervasive emphasis on the ability to replicate findings creates his titular “tyranny of light” (2015: 27) that undermines the credibility and legitimacy of other important research traditions.

Indeed, *JHR* has always been committed to publishing work from a variety of research traditions. Work from anthropologists, historians, novelists, journalists, and activists who use a variety of methods have formed the foundation of *JHR* since its inception. We do not intend for this to change, and most of this work requires approaches where complete transparency regarding data sources is impossible and the researcher’s interpretation of events involving populations at risk is the very thing that adds value to the work. Pachirat provides an example of this logic when he says, “the very foundations of interpretive ethnography rest on an ontology in which the social world in which the researcher immerses, observes, and participates is already always co-constituted in intersubjective relationship with the researcher” (2015: 29). Publishing work that spans disciplines and research approaches and data sources is central to *JHR*’s mission and needs to be encouraged in human rights scholarship more generally in order for both quantitative and qualitative/mixed-method approaches to thrive.

A potential happy side effect that *JHR*’s new submission requirement on replication data could have is to demystify quantitative methods to the majority of human rights scholars who do *not* employ these approaches. This is particularly important for work involving quantitative methods because the act of selecting one of any number of variables and modeling techniques can change outcomes dramatically. Therefore, scholars can use replication sets as a means of retesting models with different data or with new measures as they are developed. We hope that this will allow qualitative scholars to interrogate and enhance the crucial steps of conceptualization and operationalization of those doing quantitative work. The steps of conceptualization and operationalization are essential to the creation of accurate measures of human rights. At its most elemental level, building measures of complex social phenomena (like human rights practices and outcomes) require the same types of interpretation as that employed in nonquantitative analysis.

Ultimately, I believe our policy shift on replication datasets has many benefits and few costs. One major benefit is to create a space where scholars can use and share data to further advance interdisciplinary approaches to human rights. Another benefit is to add an additional way for scholars to engage with publications in *JHR*, which will raise the profile of human rights scholarship published in this journal and more generally. Finally, this move helps to foster conversations between scholars with different methodological backgrounds that will improve the quality of everyone’s work. I also feel confident that only applying this policy to quantitative pieces employing statistical modeling techniques is sufficiently constrained so that it will avoid the problems of privacy and security raised by those who use qualitative and other mixed-methods approaches. I also know that the *JHR* editorial staff remains committed to publishing nonquantitative interdisciplinary work on human rights. In the end, we are tremendously thankful to all those who have been willing to share their

work with *JHR* so far — across disciplines, approaches, continents, and communities — and we all owe a debt to those who plan to do so in the future.

Note

1. An example of a high-profile data fabrication includes the recent scandal centering around analysis of the effectiveness of Gay Rights Canvassing (LaCour and Green 2014) that, after much national attention, was retracted after being discovered by someone outside the peer-review process (Konnikova, 2015). An example of a data mistake from another discipline includes the now infamous finding by prominent economists that high levels of government debt lead to negative economic growth. The mistake was caught by a graduate student trying to replicate the finding (Alexander 2013). Finally, recent concerns in political science (Lupia and Elman 2014) and psychology (Open Science Collaboration 2015) over low rates of replicability also feed into a greater fixation on transparency and replicability.

Notes on contributor

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