

Debating the Value of DA-RT for Qualitative Research

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Unexplored Advantages of DA-RT for Qualitative Research

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Introduction

Discussion regarding the introduction and expansion of data access and research transparency (DA-RT) standards in political science has aroused a lively debate (e.g. Büthe et al. 2015). Scholars of various methodological orientations—qualitative researchers, theorists and even some experimentalists—have raised several concerns about the desirability or difficulties of implementing these standards (Fujii 2016; Isaac 2015; Pachirat 2015). Yet, the argument for making qualitative research more accessible and transparent has already been presented in several excellent pieces (see, e.g., Büthe et al. 2015; Büthe and Jacobs 2015; Elman, Kapiszewski, and Vinuela 2010; Elman and Kapiszewski 2014; Gleditsch and Kern 2016; Lupia and Elman 2014; Moravcsik 2014). We have also supported the introduction of these standards, extending the logic of preregistration to qualitative analysis (Piñeiro and Rosenblatt 2016, Piñeiro, Pérez, and Rosenblatt 2016). In this brief note, we add to the literature cited above by highlighting a different perspective on the assessment of the introduction and expansion of DA-RT practices in the discipline, especially in qualitative research with a focus on preregistration. It is important at the outset to stress that our claims are only valid for—and can thus be only applied to—positivist qualitative

research, i.e. research that seeks to make descriptive and causal claims regarding a research problem. The interpretivist tradition in political science and other traditions in the social sciences and humanities follow other epistemological rules (Sil, Castro, and Calasanti 2016). Our discussion is not meant to suggest that one tradition is superior to others.

We have conducted various studies in which we have preregistered the research designs and analysis and we have also made efforts to facilitate data access and replication to the greatest possible degree, what Büthe and Jacobs (2015) dubbed as “replication-in-thought” (57). We have participated in several studies that combined natural experiment research designs with field and survey experiments, using administrative, survey, and interview data. We will describe our experience studying the reproduction of activism in Uruguay’s Broad Front party to illustrate the role of DA-RT in improving how we design, conduct and analyze our research. Ours was an in-depth case study undertaken to test descriptive and explanatory hypotheses about the origin of the Broad Front as a mass-organic leftist party and the reproduction of its activism. We used different techniques (process tracing and survey experiment) and different data collection tools (in-depth interviews, archival research from press and party documents, and survey research). In this note, we will first argue that preregistration helped us in the design of our experimental and qualitative research. While one of the main arguments in favor of DA-RT is that it makes analysis more transparent, we will argue that it also improves qualitative theory building. Second, we will describe how preregistration helped us plan our fieldwork and how it allowed us to avoid potential setbacks in the field. Third, we will describe how preregistration guided us in our assessment of what evidence we needed to test our descriptive and causal

hypotheses and, especially, how to avoid confirmatory bias in the selection of evidence.

Improving Design

One of the greatest challenges in conducting qualitative research is to develop a systematic and parsimonious theory and, more critically, to develop a clear-cut connection between theory and working hypotheses. In our experience, preregistration helped us build a more systematic theory and a clearer relationship between theory building and hypothesis-generation from the very early stages of our research.¹

Preregistration enabled us to prepare a good set of hypotheses. In a previous paper (c.f. Piñeiro and Rosenblatt 2016) we stated that: “The PAP-Q [pre-analysis plan-qualitative] is premised on the idea that a great proportion of qualitative research work (and much of its virtue) lies in its inductive character. Nonetheless, this inductive nature does not preclude the development of theoretical claims, and does not entail that everything be learned or done in the field... The PAP-Q seeks to establish a formal beginning to the iterative alternation between empirical work and theory...” (788). Our commitment to preregister the design for our analysis of the reproduction of activism in Uruguay’s Broad Front generated a clear milestone that motivated us to develop a clear body of hypotheses. While proceeding in this manner may have delayed the beginning of our fieldwork (see below), it forced us to think thoroughly and rigorously about our theory and our working hypotheses.

Preregistration also helps one select and explicate the analytical strategies one intends to use and the type of evidence necessary to test one’s working hypotheses. This reduces the temptation to—consciously or unconsciously—omit some information or to avoid seeking certain kinds of information or evidence. Preregistration, however, does not preclude the possibility that, for example, during fieldwork new evidence might come to light and help one test the hypotheses or force one to reformulate the original working hypotheses. All research is a process and qualitative research is an iterative process alternating between theory and evidence (Elman and Lupia 2016; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003). The crucial issue here is that, with preregistration, the researcher improves the transparency of this iterative

process. Once the researcher has committed to seek a given type of evidence, he or she must present the results of that search and analyze the data in a manner consistent with the previously formulated plan. Conducting this systematic process after preregistration facilitates research transparency, reduces the researcher’s moral hazard, and allows one to assess the evidence included and discarded in the course of the research.

Clearly establishing the role of each piece of evidence (causal process observation, CPO), how the data will be analyzed and weighted (in the case of process tracing), and what sources will be used to obtain such evidence helps the researcher avoid an ad hoc analysis that is tied to the evidence collected. For example, Bennett and Checkel (2015) present a list of good practices for process tracing. Preregistration helps promote good practices, such as determining the relevance of the evidence collected in light of the potential biases of evidentiary sources, and deciding when to stop the data collection and analysis. This, in turn, helps one to develop clear codification rules *ex ante* that will facilitate replication of the analysis; for example, the researcher identifies in advance the outcomes he or she expects to obtain (or not) from in-depth interviews with different interviewees (e.g. what type of answers the researcher expects from a given set of questions). When combined with data access, this practice improves transparency in qualitative research. For example, it helps one to check whether all relevant questions were included for each interviewee.

Improving Fieldwork

As every methods textbook suggests, a good design leads to good fieldwork. Preregistration, a key trait of DA-RT, is an important tool for improving the quality of our research designs. Thus, a good pre-analysis plan improves the quality and the efficiency of our fieldwork. This is even more crucial for qualitative research, where fieldwork typically offers a one-shot opportunity and is time consuming. Prior to undertaking fieldwork, a qualitative researcher must develop a clear sense of the questions to ask and also identify the kinds of evidence they might need. Both steps help elucidate the data necessary to test specific hypotheses and therefore help ensure that the fieldwork undertaken is efficient. In the case of our analysis of the Broad Front in Uruguay,

1 Preregistration, via a Pre-Analysis Plan (PAP) is: “...a document that formalizes and declares the design and analysis plan for your study. It is written before the analysis is conducted and is generally registered on a third-party website. The objectives of the PAP are to improve research design choices, increase research transparency, and allow other scholars to replicate your analysis.” (Source: EGAP, available at <http://egap.org/methods-guides/10-things-pre-analysis-plans>, last accessed September 26, 2019). While this is a relatively common practice in experimental research, it is less frequent in observational studies (and even less so in qualitative research).

preregistration guided us to focus on the relevant evidence and sources, that is, to list the documents needed, the people we wanted to interview, and the kind of questions we needed to ask to test our hypotheses (Piñeiro, Pérez, and Rosenblatt 2016). For example, we identified the type of evidence needed to support the claim that the grassroots activist structure of the Broad Front never oligarchized; we planned to observe this through in-depth interviews with party leaders, review of party documents, online survey, observation of party activities, the party's administrative records, and review of press articles. We succeeded at collecting CPOs from these sources. Additionally, we reported what evidence we were not able to find or build from existing sources. For example, we were not able to calculate the exact turnover of grassroots' delegates to the FA national directorate (Plenario Nacional). By systematically reporting both the evidence found and the evidence not found, we were able to assess the CPOs as a whole and get a clear picture of the Broad Front. This also helps readers to assess the relevance of the evidence presented.

Pre-registration provides an opportunity to pause and forces the researcher to think thoroughly before executing the fieldwork. This does not mean that preregistered research designs are immune to error in design and implementation. However, it does encourage more thoughtful and conscious research. In his classic work, Sartori (1970) urged researchers to seek better conceptual and theoretical foundations for their work. Preregistration promotes this practice and prevents researchers from initiating projects without having a clear conceptualization and solid theoretical foundations. In the case of our Broad Front study, we preregistered the necessary and sufficient evidence to test our hypotheses. This helped us calibrate our in-depth interviews and the logic of archival research. Also, it guided our design of the survey questionnaire in terms of relevant outcomes.

Some scholars might claim that DA-RT in general, and preregistration in particular, is a straitjacket that precludes the possibility of being open to new findings and/or dampens creativity promoted by the induction process. Yet, in our experience, preregistration helped order the creative process of developing a systematic theory and planning fieldwork. It also guided our process of induction. We outlined the main nodes of the process we wanted to trace to describe and explain the production and reproduction of the Broad Front as a party with a grassroots structure where activists regularly engage with the party. For our analysis, we selected sources that we thought could—or, in the case of party

documents, should—signal such party structure. To reiterate, preregistration in qualitative research conceives of the possibility of updating one's theory (Piñeiro and Rosenblatt 2016); preregistration simply makes more transparent the iteration between theory and evidence. Also, if the researcher knows beforehand what to expect from his or her fieldwork, the researcher can be more open to unexpected results and can delve more deeply into these new findings.

One of the main challenges of qualitative research is to decide when to stop (Bennett and Checkel 2015). The conventional practice is to stop when the iteration between theory and evidence ceases to generate new insights, similar to the saturation criterion in in-depth interviews. However, there always remains doubt as to whether other pieces of evidence might change one's theory. A way to avoid this problem is to commit to search for a given piece of evidence as a function of one's expectation. Thus, beyond post-hoc saturation, there is a clear preestablished endpoint. In the event that the researcher fails to find sufficient evidence, he or she can easily report the reasons for not fulfilling the stated commitment and the scope of the evidence collected in relation to the preregistered expectation.

Improving Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative analysis is complex and requires researchers to make a large number of decisions. These decisions are often obscured behind parsimonious theories, narrative, and analysis. Even in lengthier academic works, such as books, which are better suited for the presentation of qualitative research, authors rarely detail the process of data collection and data analysis. Therefore, replication or the simple analysis of each decision becomes impossible. It is difficult, therefore, to evaluate analytical mistakes and identify better approaches to the same research problem. Also, in the peer review process, while a referee may prefer to focus on the paper, access to a detailed preregistered analysis plan and a full appendix with all research materials improves the assessment of the research. The credibility of a research project is enhanced when there exists the possibility of replicating the findings (King 1995). More generally, it is critical for the cumulation of knowledge to explicate analytical decisions (Elman and Kapiszewski 2014; Elman and Lupia 2016; Lupia and Elman 2014).

In the case of qualitative analysis, explicitly answering questions—e.g. why was a given person interviewed? Why was a particular set of documents reviewed? What documents were left out? What is the bias of the

sources reviewed and what is the relevance of such bias for the study's conclusions? What are the limits of the sources?—is important for assessing the quality of the evidence and its analysis. Causal claims in qualitative research depend on two criteria: finding evidence to support the researcher's working hypotheses and finding evidence to reject rival hypotheses (Bennett and Checkel 2015; Zaks 2017). The former is the obvious role of empirical research: an investigation needs to collect evidence to support its theoretical claims, and it has to present such evidence following disciplinary standards (Elman and Kapiszewski 2014). The latter is critical for qualitative research, especially in cases where the researcher was not able to observe or collect conclusive evidence for the main hypotheses. In such cases, rejecting rival hypotheses helps in the construction of a plausible causal argument regarding a given process. How rival hypotheses are themselves rejected depends upon the transparency of the analysis. Preregistration forces the researcher to acknowledge alternative hypotheses early on, making the manipulation of rival claims much more difficult.²

Conclusion

Research transparency is costly. Yet at stake is a shared standard of transparency, the value of which outweighs the costs (Elman and Lupia 2016). At stake is the reliability of work that is usually funded with public resources, and that produces a public good which might eventually guide public policy decisions. If social scientists wish greater respect from the larger science community, they must adapt and be willing to fully disclose the nature of their research process. Elman and Lupia (2016) state that: "The process-dependence of knowledge generation has a transparency corollary: if there are stable practices for properly conducting investigation and analysis, and if the legitimacy of a knowledge claim depends on those practices being followed, then the less you can see of the process, the less access you have to the context from which the knowledge claim has been derived. This corollary determines the nature of openness" (44). Fortunately, recently several scholars have built the tools and necessary infrastructure to improve data access and research transparency in qualitative social sciences (see

e.g., Elman and Kapiszewski 2018; Moravcsik 2010, 2014).

Comparativists, interpretativists, and experimentalists tend to raise different concerns about the implementation of DA-RT standards (Fujii 2016; Htun 2016; Pachirat 2015). For example, some emphasize the need to prioritize the safety of sensitive informants or administrative information over the transparency of research; the intellectual property of ideas and data is also at stake. The answer to this concern and trade-off (and to other issues) is to exercise common sense, an answer already included in the guidelines.³ For example, research ethics, e.g., the content of informed consent agreements and confidentiality agreements in general, places bounds on the degree of transparency in DA-RT. As stated above, this logic of preregistration is only valid for an epistemology that seeks to describe and explain a certain research problem. Moreover, as Elman and Lupia (2016) and Bütte and Jacobs (2015) state, there is no "one size fits all" standard, but there is a shared principle.

Research transparency is not different from transparency in politics and public administration. Modern democracies require transparency, and politicians and bureaucrats are subjected to the standards set forth by, for example, freedom of information laws. Politicians and civil servants usually complain that these standards in fact raise the costs of government and are time consuming, affecting policy and administration. This concern is also raised by scholars, who usually see transparency standards as unwarranted requirements in a line of work where the administrative and procedural burden is heavy. We agree with this concern and it is evident that these standards involve more work, more costs, and more time. Yet, DA-RT also brings many positive externalities and, as Elman and Lupia write: "... DA-RT is based on the broad and epistemically neutral consensus that the content of empirical social inquiry depends on the processes that produce it. Offering others access to these processes makes conclusions of social inquiry more understandable, more evaluable, and more usable" (2016, 45).

² Preregistration limits the chances of manipulation at the beginning of the fieldwork stage, yet it does not rule out the possibility of ex-ante manipulation. This is particularly relevant for observational data studies, as is the case in qualitative research. Therefore, transparency in observational studies relies heavily on the researcher's principles.

³ <https://www.dartstatement.org/2012-apsa-ethics-guide-changes>

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