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Contents

Letter from the Editors

It is an honor to take up the reins as editors of *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research*. For 12 years, this newsletter has offered incisive discussion and spirited debate of the logic and practice of qualitative and multi-method research. It has been a venue for critical reflection on major new publications and for the presentation of novel arguments, long before they hit the journals and the bookshelves. Among the newsletter's most important hallmarks has been the inclusion of—and, often, dialogue across—the wide range of scholarly perspectives encompassed by our intellectually diverse section. We are grateful to our predecessors John Gerring, Gary Goertz, and Robert Adcock for building this newsletter into a distinguished outlet, and delighted to have the opportunity to extend its tradition of broad and vigorous scholarly engagement.

In this issue, we present a symposium on an issue that has been a central topic of ongoing conversation within the profession: research transparency. The symposium seeks to advance this conversation by unpacking the meaning of transparency for a wide range of qualitative and multi-method research traditions, uncovering both considerable common ground and important tensions across scholarly perspectives.

We also present here the first installment of our new Journal Scan, based on a systematic search of nearly fifty journals for recent methodological contributions to the literature on qualitative and multi-method research. Building on the "Article Notes" that have occasionally appeared in previous issues, the Journal Scan is intended to become a regular element of *QMMR*. We look forward to hearing your thoughts about this newsletter issue and your ideas for future symposia.

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Transparency About Qualitative Evidence

Data Access, Research Transparency, and Interviews: The Interview Methods Appendix

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Interviews provide a valuable source of evidence, but are often neglected or mistrusted because of limited data access for other scholars or inadequate transparency in research production or analysis. This incomplete transparency creates uncertainty about the data and leads to a "credibility gap" on interview data that has nothing to do with the integrity of the researcher. We argue that addressing transparency concerns head-on through the creation of common reporting standards on interview data will diminish this uncertainty, and thus benefit researchers who use interviews, as well as their readers and the scholarly enterprise as a whole. As a concrete step, we specifically advocate the adoption of an "Interview Methods Appendix" as a reporting standard. Data access can involve difficult ethical issues such as interviewee confidentiality, but we argue that the more data access interviewers can provide, the better. The guiding principles of the Statement on Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT) will also enhance scholarship that utilizes interviews.

A flexible and important method, interviews can be employed for preliminary research, as a central source for their study, or as one part of a multi-method research design.[1] While interviewing in the preliminary research stage can provide a very efficient way to generate research questions and hypotheses,[2] our focus here will be on how research transparency can increase the value of interviews used in the main study or as one leg of a multi-methods research design. Some types of interviews, whether interstitial or simply preliminary, are not as essential to report. However, when interviews are a core part of the research, transparency in production and analysis is critical. Although our arguments apply to a variety of sampling strategies, as discussed below, we think they are especially germane to purposive- or snowball-sampled interviews in a main study.[3]

The recent uptick in interest in qualitative methods has drawn more attention to interviews as a method. However, the benefits of emerging advances in interview methodology will only be fully realized once scholars agree on common reporting standards for data access and research transparency.

Erik Bleich is Professor of Political Science at Middlebury College. He can be found online at ebleich@middlebury.edu and http://www.middlebury.edu/academics/ps/faculty/node/25021. Robert Pekkanen is Professor at the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington. He can be found online at pekkanen@ uw.edu and http://www.robertpekkanen.com/. A fuller version of many of the arguments we make here can be found in Bleich and Pekkannen (2013) in a volume entirely devoted to interview research in political science (Mosley 2013).

[1] Lynch 2013, esp. 34–38.
[2] Lynch 2013, 34f; Gallagher 2013, 183–185. For a more general discussion of the importance of using the empirical record to develop research questions and hypotheses, see Gerring 2007, esp. 39–43.
[3] See Lynch (2013) for a lucid discussion of random, purposive, convenience, snowball and interstitial interviewing.

Main Issues with Interviews and Proposed Solutions

The use and acceptance of interviews as evidence is limited by concerns about three distinct empirical challenges: how to define and to sample the population of relevant interviewees (sampling); whether the interviews produce valid information (validity); and whether the information gathered is reliable (reliability).[4] We argue that research transparency and data access standards can mitigate these concerns and unlock an important source of evidence for qualitative researchers. We discuss examples of an Interview Methods Appendix and an Interview Methods Table here as a way to convey substantial information that helps to overcome these concerns. At the same time, we recognize that standards for reporting information will be subject to some variation depending on the nature of the research project and will evolve over time as scholars engage with these discussions. For us, the central goal is the self-conscious development of shared standards about what "essential" information should be reported to increase transparency. Our Interview Methods Appendix and Interview Methods Table are meant as a concrete starting point for this discussion.

In this context, it is useful to consider briefly the differences between surveys and interviews. Surveys are widely deployed as evidence by scholars from a variety of disciplines. Like interviews, surveys rely on information and responses gained from human informants. There are many well-understood complications involved in gathering and assessing survey data. Survey researchers respond to these challenges by reporting their methods in a manner that enables others to judge how much faith to place in the results. We believe that if similar criteria for reporting interview data were established, then interviews would become a more widely trusted and used source of evidence. After all, surveys can be thought of as a collection of short (sometimes not so short) interviews. Surveys and interviews thus fall on a continuum, with trade-offs between large-n and small-n studies. Just as scholars stress the value of both types of studies, depending on the goal of the researchers,[5] both highly structured survey research and semi- or unstructured "small-n" interviews, such as elite interviews, should have their place in the rigorous scholar's tool kit.[6]

[4] Here we follow Mosley's (2013a, esp. 14–26) categorization, excluding only her normative category of the challenge of ethics, which we address only as it relates to DA-RT issues. See also Berry (2002) on issues of validity and reliability.

[5] See Lieberman 2005, 435.

[6] Many scholars believe that interviews provide a wealth of contextual data that are essential to their interpretations, understanding, or analysis. We do not argue that an Interview Methods Appendix can communicate every piece of potentially relevant information, but rather that it can convey a particular range of information in order to increase the credibility of interviews as a research method. Information not summarized in the Interview Methods Appendix may include what Mosley calls "meta-data" (2013a, 7, 22, 25). Exactly *what* information must be reported (and what can be omitted) is subject to a process of consensual scholarly development; we view our suggestions as a starting point for this process.

Qualitative social scientists can benefit from a common set of standards for reporting their data so that readers and reviewers can judge the value of their evidence. As with quantitative work, it will be impossible for qualitative researchers to achieve perfection in their methods, and interview-based work should not be held to an unrealistic standard. But producers and consumers of qualitative scholarship profit from being more conscious about the methodology of interviewing and from being explicit about reporting uncertainty. Below, we discuss how transparent reporting works for researchers engaged in purposive sampling and for those using snowballing techniques.

Sampling: Purposive Sampling Frames and Snowball Additions

It is often possible for the researcher to identify a purposive, theoretically motivated set of target interviewees prior to going into the field. We believe that doing this in advance of the interviews, and then reporting interviews successfully obtained, requests refused, and requests to which the target interviewee never responded, has many benefits. For one, this kind of self-conscious attention to the sampling frame will allow researchers to hone their research designs before they enter the field. After identifying the relevant population of actors involved in a process, researchers can focus on different classes of actors within that population—such as politicians, their aides, civil servants from the relevant bureaucracies, NGOs, knowledgeable scholars and journalists, etc.—different types within the classes—progressive and conservative politicians, umbrella and activist NGOs, etc.—and/or actors involved in different key time periods in a historical process—key players in the 1980, 1992, and 2000 elections, etc. Drawing on all classes and types of actors relevant to the research project helps ensure that researchers receive balanced information from a wide variety of perspectives. When researchers populate a sampling frame from a list created by others, the source should be reported—whether that list is of sitting parliamentarians or business leaders (perhaps drawn from a professional association membership) or some other roster of a given population of individuals.

Often used as a supplement to purposive sampling, "snowball" sampling refers to the process of seeking additional contacts from one's interviewees. For populations from which interviews can be hard to elicit (say, U.S. Senators), the technique has an obvious attraction. Important actors approached with a referral in hand are more likely to agree to an interview request than those targeted through "cold-calls." In addition, if the original interviewee is a good source, then she is likely to refer the researcher to another knowledgeable person. This snowball sampling technique can effectively reveal networks or key actors previously unknown to the researcher, thereby expanding the sampling frame. All in all, snowballing has much to commend it as a technique, and we do not argue against its use. However, we do contend that the researcher should report interviewee-list expansion to readers and adjust the sampling frame accordingly if necessary to maintain a balanced set of sources.

Non-Response Rates and Saturation

Reporting the sampling frame is a vital first step, but it is equally important to report the number of interviews sought within the sampling frame, the number obtained, and the number declined or unavailable. Drawing a parallel with large-n studies, survey researchers are generally advised to report response rates, because the higher the response rate, the more valid the survey results are generally perceived to be. Such non-response bias might also skew results in the interviewing process. In a set of interviews about attitudes towards the government, for example, those who decline to participate might do so because of a trait that would lead them to give a particular type of response to the interviewer's questions, either systematically positive or negative. If so, then we would be drawing inferences from our conducted interviews that would be inaccurate, because we would be excluding a set of interviewees that mattered a great deal to the validity of our findings. Under current reporting practices, we have no way to assess response rates or possible non-response bias in interviews. At present, the standard process involves reporting who was interviewed (and some of what was said), but not whom the author failed to reach, or who declined an interview.

In addition, to allow the reader to gauge the validity of the inferences drawn from interviews, it is crucial for the researcher to report whether she has reached the point of saturation. At saturation, each new interview within and across networks reveals no new information about a political or policymaking process.[7] If respondents are describing the same causal process as previous interviewees, if there is agreement across networks (or predictable disagreement), and if their recommendations for further interviewees mirror the list of people the researcher has already interviewed, then researchers have reached the point of saturation. Researchers must report whether they reached saturation to help convey to readers the relative certainty or uncertainty of any inferences drawn from the interviews.

In practice, this may involve framing the interview reporting in a number of different ways. For simplicity's sake, our hypothetical Interview Methods Table below shows how to report saturation within a set of purposively sampled interviewees. However, it may be more meaningful to report saturation with respect to a particular micro- or meso-level research question. To give an example related to the current research of one of us, the interview methods appendix may be organized around questions such as "Do the Left-Right political ideologies of judges affect their rulings in hate speech cases?" (high saturation), and "Were judges' hate speech decisions motivated by sentiments that racism was a pressing social problem in the period 1972-1983?" (low saturation). Reporting low saturation does not mean that research inferences drawn from the responses are invalid, only that the uncertainty around those inferences is higher, and that the author could increase confidence in her conclusions by seeking information from non-interview-based sources. Reporting levels of confidence in and uncertainty about findings are critical to research transparency.

Data Access

Once researchers have conveyed to readers that they have drawn on a valid sample, they face the task of convincing observers that the inferences drawn from those responses are similar to those that would be drawn by other researchers looking at the same data. In many ways, the ideal solution to this dilemma is to post full interview transcripts on a web site so that the curious and the intrepid can verify the data themselves. This standard of qualitative data archiving should be the discipline's goal, and we are not alone in arguing that it should move in this direction.[8] At the same time, we fully recognize that it will be impractical and even impossible in many cases. Even setting aside resource constraints, interviews are often granted based on assurances of confidentiality or are subject to conditions imposed by human subject research, raising not only practical, but also legal and ethical issues.[9]

Whether it is possible to provide full transcripts, redacted summaries of interviews, or no direct information at all due to ethical constraints, we think it is vital for researchers to communicate the accuracy of reported interview data in a rigorous manner. In many scenarios, the researcher aims to convey that the vast majority of interviewees agree on a particular point. Environmental lobbyists may judge a conservative government unsympathetic to their aims, or actors from across the political spectrum may agree on the importance of civil society groups in contributing to neighborhood policing. Rather than simply reporting this general and vague sentiment, in most instances it is possible to summarize the number of lobbyists expressing this position as a percentage of the total lobbyists interviewed and as a percentage of the lobbyists specifically asked or who spontaneously volunteered their opinion on the government's policy. Similarly, how many policymakers and politicians were interviewed, and what percentage expressed their enthusiasm for civil society groups? This is easiest to convey if the researcher has gone through the process of coding interviews that is common in some fields. It is more difficult to assess if scholars have not systematically coded their interviews, but in these circumstances it is all the more important to convey a sense of the representativeness and reliability of the information cited or quoted. Alternatively, if the researcher's analysis relies heavily on information provided in one or two interviews, it is incumbent upon the author to explain the basis upon which she trusts those sources more than others. Perhaps an interviewee has provided information that runs counter to his interests and is thus judged more likely to be truthful than his counterparts, or an actor in a critical historical juncture was at the center of a network of policymakers while others were more peripheral.

[7] Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006.

[8] See Elman, Kapiszewski, and Vinuela 2010; Moravcsik 2010, 31.

[9] Parry and Mauthner 2004; Brooks 2013; MacLean 2013. See also Mosley 2013a, 14–18.

Beyond reporting the basis for trusting some interviews over others, it is useful to remember that very few studies rely exclusively on interview data for their conclusions. While other types of sources have their own weaknesses, when interview evidence is ambiguous or not dispositive, scholars can fruitfully triangulate with other sources to resolve ambiguities in the record in order to gauge and to confirm the reliability and validity of the information gathered. Perhaps no method of summary reporting will fully convince skeptics about the accuracy of information gathered through interviews. But strategies such as those suggested here will make even-handed readers more certain about the reliability of the inferences when judging the rigor of the scholarship and the persuasiveness of the argument.

To the extent that researchers are able to provide transcripts of their interviews in online appendices or qualitative data archives—perhaps following an initial embargo period standard among quantitative researchers for newly-developed datasets, or for archivists protecting sensitive personal information—there are potentially exponential gains to be made to the research community as a whole.[10] Not only will this practice assure readers that information sought, obtained, and reported accurately conveys the reality of the political or policy-making process in question, but it will also allow researchers in years to come access to the reflections of key practitioners in their own words, which would otherwise be lost to history. Imagine if in forty years a scholar could reexamine a pressing question not only in light of the written historical record, but also with your unique interview transcripts at hand. Carefully documenting interviewing processes and evidence will enhance our confidence that we truly understand political events in the present day and for decades to come.

How and What to Report: The Interview Methods Appendix and the Interview Methods Table

How can researchers quickly and efficiently communicate that they have done their utmost to engage in methodologically rigorous interviewing techniques? We propose the inclusion of an "Interview Methods Appendix" in any significant research product that relies heavily on interviews. The Interview Methods Appendix can contain a brief discussion of key methodological issues, such as: how the sample frame was constructed; response rate to interview requests and type of interview conducted (in person, phone, email, etc.); additional and snowball interviews that go beyond the initial sample frame; level of saturation among interview categories or research questions; format and length of interview (structured, semi-structured, etc.); recording method; response rates and consistency of reported opinions; and, confidence levels and compensation strategies.[11]

It is possible to include a brief discussion of these issues in an appendix of a book with portions summarized in the general methodology section, or as an online, hyperlinked addendum to an article where space constraints are typically more severe.[12] In addition, large amounts of relevant methodological information can be summarized in an Interview Methods Table. We provide an example of a table here to demonstrate its usefulness in communicating core information. This table is based on hypothetical research into the German state's management of far right political parties in the early 2000s, and thus conveys a purposive sample among non-far right politicians, far right politicians, constitutional court judges, German state bureaucrats, and anti-racist NGOs. Setting up a table in this way allows readers to understand key elements related to

Table 1: Hypothetical Interview Methods Table

Interviewee	Status	Source	Saturation	Format	Length	Recording	Transcript
Category 1			Yes				
CDU politician	Conducted in person 4/22/2004	Sample frame		Semi-structured	45 mins	Concurrent notes & supplementary notes w/i 1 hr	Confidentiality requested
SPD politician Hart	Conducted in person 4/22/2004	Sample frame & referred by CDU politician		Semi-structured	1 hr	Audio recording	transcript posted
Green politician	Conducted in person 4/23/2004	Sample frame		Semi-structured	45 mins	Concurrent notes & supplementary notes w/i 1 hr	Confidentiality requested
FDP politician Weiss	Refused 2/18/2004	Sample frame					
Die Linke politician	No response	Sample frame					
SPD politician's aide	Conducted in person 4/26/2004	Referred by SPD politician Hart		Semi-structured	1 hr 15 mins	Audio recording	Confidentiality required

[10] Elman, Kapiszewski, and Vinuela 2010.

[11] Bleich and Pekkanen 2013, esp. 95–105.

[12] Moravcsik 2010, 31f.

Table 1 (cont.): Hypothetical Interview Methods Table

Interviewee	Status	Source	Saturation	Format	Length	Recording	Transcript
Category 2			No				
REP politician	No response	Sample frame					
DVU politician	No response	Sample frame					
NPD politician	Accepted 3/16/2004; then declined 4/20/2004	Sample frame					
NPD lawyer	Declined 4/20/2004	Sample frame					
Category 3			No				
Constitutional Court judge 1	No response	Sample frame					
Constitutional Court judge 2	No response	Substitute in sample frame					
Category 4			Yes				
Interior Ministry bureaucrat 1	Conducted in person 4/24/2004	Sample frame		Semi-structured	45 mins	Concurrent notes & supplementary notes w/i 1 hr	Confidentiality required
Interior Ministry bureaucrat 2	Conducted in person 4/24/2004	Sample frame		Semi-structured	45 mins	Concurrent notes & supplementary notes w/i 1 hr	Confidentiality required
Justice Ministry bureaucrat	Conducted via email 4/30/2004	Referred by Interior Ministry bureaucrat 2		Structured	N/A	Email transcript	Confidentiality required
Category 5			Yes				
Anti-fascist NGO leader Korn	Conducted in person 4/22/2004	Sample frame		Semi-structured	1 hr 10 mins	Audio recording	Redacted transcript posted
Anti-fascist NGO leader Knoblauch	Conducted in person 4/25/2004	Sample frame		Semi-structured	50 mins	Audio recording	Redacted transcript posted
Anti-fascist NGO leader 3	Not sought	Referred by Anti-Fascist NGO leader Korn					
Anti-discrimination NGO leader Spitz	Conducted in person 4/29/2004	Referred by Anti-Fascist NGO leader Korn and by Far Right scholar Meyer		Semi-structured	1 hr 30 mins	Audio recording	Transcript posted
Overall			High				See www.bleichpekkanen.transcripts*

* Sample Methods Table for a hypothetical research project (see text). All names and the URL are imaginary.

sampling and to the validity and reliability of inferences. It therefore conveys the comprehensiveness of the inquiry and the confidence level related to multiple aspects of the interview component of any given research project.

We recognize that legitimate constraints imposed by Institutional Review Boards, by informants themselves, or by professional ethics may force researchers to keep some details of the interview confidential and anonymous. In certain cases, the Interview Methods Table might contain "confidentiality requested" and "confidentiality required" for every single interview. We do not seek to change prevailing practices that serve to protect informants. However, we believe that even in such circumstances, the interviewer can safely report many elements in an Interview Methods Appendix and Interview Methods Table—to the benefit of researcher and reader alike. A consistent set of expectations for reporting will give readers more confidence in research based on interview data, which in turn will liberate researchers to employ this methodology more often and with more rigor.

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Transparency in Practice: Using Written Sources

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Individual researchers, according to the revised set of guidelines adopted by the American Political Science Association two years ago, "have an ethical obligation to facilitate the evaluation of their evidence-based knowledge claims" not just by providing access to their data, but also by explaining how they assembled that data and how they drew "analytic conclusions" from it.[1] The assumption was that research transparency is of fundamental importance for the discipline as a whole, and that by holding the bar higher in this area, the rigor and richness of scholarly work in political science could be substantially improved.[2]

Few would argue with the point that transparency is in principle a good idea. But various problems arise when one tries to figure out what all this means in practice. I would like to discuss some of them here and present some modest proposals about what might be done in this area. While the issues that I raise here have broad implications for transparency in political research, I will be concerned here mainly with the use of a particular form of evidence: primary and secondary written sources.

Let me begin by talking about the first of the three points in the APSA guidelines, the one having to do with access to data. The basic notion here is that scholars should provide clear references to the sources they use to support their claims—and that it should be easy for anyone who wants to check those claims to find the sources in question. Of the three points, this strikes me as the least problematic. There's a real problem here that needs to be addressed, and there are some simple measures we can take to deal with it. So if it were up to me this would be the first thing I would focus on.

What should be done in this area? One of the first things I was struck by when I started reading the political science literature is the way a scholar would back up a point by citing, in parentheses in the text, a long list of books and articles, without including particular page numbers in those texts that a reader could go to see whether they provided real support for the point in question. Historians like me didn't do this kind of thing, and this practice struck me as rather bizarre. Did those authors really expect their readers to plow through those books and articles in their entirety in the hope of finding the particular passages that related to the specific claims being made? Obviously not. It seemed that the real goal was to establish the author's scholarly credentials by providing such a list. The

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[1] American Political Science Association 2012.

[2] See especially Moravcsik 2014.