

Research on Vulnerable and Marginalized Populations

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I. Conceptual Introduction and Definitions:

The category “vulnerable and marginalized populations” is far broader than Institutional Review Boards (IRB) often suggest. University IRB references to vulnerable and marginalized populations often include: pregnant women, human fetuses and neonates, children, cognitively impaired persons, prisoners, students and employees, and educationally disadvantaged individuals. While some of these identity groups face specific forms of vulnerability relevant to social science research, their particular forms of vulnerability and marginalization are contingent on the research context and objectives. The specific ways in which populations are rendered vulnerable also shifts with changing political climate or changes to the research. Pregnant women are unlikely to be considered vulnerable for the purposes of much social science research; whereas adult males might be targets of political surveillance and monitoring.

Further, when studying politics, there are many other groups and individuals that could be rendered vulnerable in the course of the research. Informants or political activists living under authoritarian regimes would not fit any of the above definitions of ‘vulnerable subjects’ but could face significant danger if any compromising information about their identities were published. Even in liberal democracies, political activists who challenge authorities or break the law as part of their practice may also face legal and other dangers. Moreover, subjects may also be vulnerable and marginalized because of their position in the social and political hierarchy, and may face a range of possible reprisals even for perfectly legal actions. Being attentive to the ways in which vulnerability and marginalization are constituted vis-à-vis specific research questions is crucial in order to mitigate risk. Reliance on categories designated by university IRBs unfamiliar with the context in which social science research is being conducted is insufficient. Rather, vulnerability and marginalization must be defined in the context of each study.

Given a fluid definition of vulnerability and marginalization, scholars working with marginalized and vulnerable populations have largely defined research transparency in ways that are fairly consistent with the JETS statement. Drawing from the qualitative transparency deliberations, there is broad consensus that:

"Transparency requires making visible both the empirical foundation and the logic of inquiry of research" (<http://www.dartstatement.org/2014-journal-editors-statement-jets>).

The subsequent section delineates precisely what researchers mean by research transparency as it pertains to this broad population. The data used to compile this report draws from a broad range of scholars who participated in multiple stages of the qualitative transparency deliberations. These include reflections from scholars working across a broad range of subfields and epistemological traditions.

II. Forms of transparency and their benefits:

Research transparency is crucial for furthering scholarly knowledge, and in this section, we elaborate three different forms of transparency (and their benefits) that are relevant to work with vulnerable and marginalized populations: transparency about the research process (including data analysis); transparency about research ethics and researcher positionality; and transparency with regard to sharing primary source data.

Transparency about the research process and data analysis

The most frequently referenced form of transparency that emerged from the qualitative transparency deliberations was transparency regarding the **research process**: namely, providing clear and extensive details about the project's conceptualization, implementation and data analysis to readers (including journal, book and other editors, reviewers, and any readers of published work). Specifically, this means explaining the original project design (what the researcher planned to do, and why) and the details about "how the research actually unfolded."¹ This explanation should describe the initial research plans and also provide an "exhaustive account of what we [actually] did, how we made our choices, and justify those choices within a broader research literature."² Here this account would clarify how data was *actually* collected and detail the choices made to this end, including any changes made during the research process. Furthermore, given the risks that marginalized and vulnerable populations may face when participating in research (detailed in subsequent sections), the researcher should also discuss any "ethical dilemmas, 'mistakes,' or missteps and surprises that the actual process entail[ed]"³.

In addition to detailing the plans for data collection and how these plans actually unfolded, it is important for researchers to also explain how their evidence/data/observations about marginalized and vulnerable populations were assessed/analyzed to yield findings. Essentially, researchers must explain how they came to their conclusions.⁴ For example, imagine a researcher is conducting interview to learn how residents of halfway houses in the US participated in government-sponsored job training programs. Here the researcher may describe, for example, whether and how she coded interview transcripts with half-way house residents in a particular way. To illustrate: was she looking for how frequently these interviewees referenced a certain government program for formerly incarcerated people? Or was she looking for how they

¹ Fujii, Lee Ann/Guest, "Re: Question 2: Transparency," Discussion forum IV.3., QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, Sat Nov 19, 2016 10:14 am.

² Price, J. Ricky/Guest, "Re: Question 2: Transparency," Discussion forum IV.3., QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, Sat Nov 19, 2016 10:14 am.

³ Fujii, Lee Ann/Guest, "Re: Question 2: Transparency," Discussion forum IV.3., QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, Sat Nov 19, 2016 10:14 am.

⁴ Schwarz, Tanya/Guest, "Re: Question 2: Transparency," Discussion forum IV.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, Thu Oct 20, 2016 3:22 pm.

described the programs' impact on their lives? Or some combination of both? This description would clarify to the reader the goals of the research and how the researcher used the data (as it relates to the researcher's question), which is important because the researcher could not be expected to share the full interview transcripts given the risks this would pose to interviewees (e.g. revealing a person's identifying details in a way that could compromise his or her participation the program). And so, describing the analytic process would show the reader that the researcher is not simply "cherry picking" from the data that is not publicly accessible to other scholars.

On this subject, Clemens (2017) notes that data-sharing can potentially make possible two particular forms of evaluation. One is *verification*: can I generate the same finding by following the same analytic steps as the author did using the author's data? A second is *reanalysis*: can I generate the same finding by analyzing the author's data in a different way? While original data can, under some circumstances, be useful for these purposes, it is not necessary. Instead, knowing how, specifically, a researcher conducted their study gives me the tools to critique and evaluate the basis on which its claims were made. Further still, it enables scholars to replicate, extend and reproduce. If another scholar studies a different set of cases (say, different individuals) from the same population in a research study, is she able to follow their analytic steps to see if she arrives at the same finding as you did? If she studies a different population, using similar analytic procedures, is she able to compare her findings with those presented in the research? For each of these forms of evaluation, we need to know quite specifically how scholars approached their research. But we do not need to see primary source data that poses any forms of risk to the populations who participated in the research (Büthe and Jacobs 2015). Altogether, a number of scholars have noted that being transparent about the research process—from conception to data analysis, as described above-- should allow others to evaluate the basis of the analytic claims, and to "reasonably replicate the study from what is shared in the publication."⁵

For more on how this relates to specific issues for vulnerable and marginalized populations, Parkinson (16th May 2016) writes:

Due to the intellectual, political, and physical difficulty of much violence research, I'd infer that many of us are most interested in the evaluating the conditions of possibility for a scholar's claims rather than reviewing their "data" in the form of transcripts. Data—including interviews and field notes--can be faked by those intent on doing so. It's much harder to convincingly fake depth of field experience/knowledge or an ethical sensibility.

When reviewing work involving at-risk populations, therefore, factors such as the relationship between the time a scholar spent in their field site and their stated methodological approach; knowledge of the geographic variation/specificities; language skills and embeddedness; the use of local labor in the form of RAs, or facilitators; and discussion of how the political environment might have influenced their work, are each meaningful and illuminating sources of information and transparency that allow others to critically assess the claims made.

Transparency with research participants (about project, risks and benefits)
Transparency concerning ethics and researcher positionality

⁵ Jackson/Guest, "[Re: Question 2: Transparency](#)," Discussion forum IV.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, Mon Oct 31, 2016 3:30 pm

- How human participants were protected and what ethical dilemmas were confronted: What does it mean to be transparent about this? Why is it beneficial?

In addition to emphasizing transparency with regard to the research process, scholars working with vulnerable and marginalized populations must also be open and honest about **the project's risks and benefits** with both their readers *and* their research participants.

Before explaining this particular form of openness further, we would like to clarify that this element of transparency must go beyond what IRBs typically require. As we note above, IRBs tend to have a very limited conception of what constitutes a vulnerable population, and their understanding of “research openness” is generally limited to the researcher explaining to research participants who she is (i.e. her university affiliation), the goals of her study, and the particular risks the participant may face, as enumerated on any consent documents. While this process may be sufficient for many projects, it does not encourage (although it does not foreclose) the researcher from clarifying her position of power further, or, by extension, encourage participants to engage with and challenge the researchers about aspects of the study.

We therefore recommend a more *dialogic* approach to sharing and discussing risks and benefits with participants. As Jackson explains in her comments, this means being open about one’s subject position as a researcher by both explaining the risks, benefits, etc. of the study to the research participants *and* acknowledging the researcher’s own privilege/position of power in relation to them.⁶ This acknowledgment involves more than explaining to participants that the researcher will most likely have the final say over how the data from their interaction is presented (for example)—it also means working to redistribute power by encouraging participants to ask questions at any time about the research process, procedures, etc., and challenge the researcher about his or her work. This dialogic approach is particularly important when researchers are working with vulnerable/marginalized populations because, oftentimes, members of these populations are “spoken for” and/or acted up in the research process, with little say in how their communities are studied and, subsequently, represented in research to policymakers, advocates etc.⁷

The following example of Samantha Majic’s study of sex worker rights activists in the San Francisco Bay Area will, we hope, explain the benefits of going beyond the IRB requirements regarding openness towards participants for both readers and research participants.⁸ In this study, Majic recruited sex workers through two community based non-profit organizations to learn about how they used the services at these organizations and, by extension, how this shaped their political participation. As Majic (2011, 2014) explains, to recruit sex workers for her study, she

⁶ Jackson/Guest, "Re: Question 2: Transparency," Discussion forum IV.3, QTD Discussion Board, www.qualtd.net, Mon Oct 31, 2016 3:30 pm

⁷ For example, see discussion in Bowen, Raven, and Tamara O'Doherty. 2014. "Participant-Driven Action Research (PDAR) with Sex Workers in Vancouver." In *Negotiating sex work : unintended consequences of policy and activism*, edited by Carisa Renae Showden and Samantha Majic, 53-76. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁸ See for example Majic, Samantha. 2011. "Serving Sex Workers and Promoting Democratic Engagement: Rethinking nonprofits' role in American Civic and Political Life." *Perspectives on Politics* 9(4): 821-840 and Majic, Samantha. 2014. *Sex Work Politics: From Protest to Service Provision*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

offered a financial incentive (\$20) to sex workers in exchange for interviews. Many readers may be curious about why she made this decision: would this not constitute bribery of sorts? In response to such a query, Majic explains that as a (then) graduate student, this was the most money that she was able to offer from the small grant that funded her research, and she clarified that it tended to attract more marginalized, street-based sex workers to her study (as opposed to, for example, those who conducted potentially more lucrative indoor escort work).

Explaining her position of power to readers is important, but it was also important for her to explain this incentive to her participants. Here Majic realized that while she offered a relatively small incentive, it was large to many of the sex workers she interviewed, who would use it to purchase basic necessities, such as food. As a result, she adopted a dialogic approach to explaining her study's risks and benefits that included her being honest with her participants about the purpose of her incentive, as she did not want interview participants to feel that they had to provide answers that they hoped Majic wanted to hear (whatever those may be) because they did not want to risk losing their incentive. Therefore, she explained to participants that the incentive was their compensation for participating in the interview, and, by extension, *not* for offering certain answers. This explanation, she believed, helped put her participants at ease so that they could be as honest as possible in their interviews with her.

Altogether, this example indicates the importance about being clear with readers and participants about the power relations in this category of research: to show that data was not coerced in some way, readers and participants need to know—and researchers need to clarify—the strengths and limits of their position of power vis-à-vis research participants. By encouraging researchers to acknowledge their own subject positions to readers and research participants, our understanding of transparency further reinforces notions of research integrity by acknowledging the power relations in the research endeavor and how these may shape data collection and findings. In so doing, we can clarify how all of this may generate one set of results, while those who approach our topic differently and/or from different subject positions may achieve different results (for example, had Majic offered a larger cash incentive, she may have attracted more upper-income sex workers to her study, as this would offer more compensation for their time).

Transparency with regard to sharing data

- What does it mean to share data? Why might it be beneficial?

With regard to data sharing, we—as scholars who work with marginalized and/or vulnerable populations—believe that that transparency *does not necessarily* mean providing primary research materials, including interview transcripts and field (and other) notes, to journal editors, scholars, or other readers. The reasons for this position are explained in more detail in sections below, but they are somewhat obvious: sharing “raw” field notes, interview transcripts, etc. may expose members of marginalized/vulnerable populations’ identities and compromise their safety, livelihoods, etc.

At the same time, there may be cases where or conditions under which sharing primary data may be desirable; however, this is certainly context specific and depends heavily on the researcher’s

relationship with his or her participants. Here we offer some examples where data sharing may be acceptable for scholars working with marginalized/vulnerable populations:

- If research is conducted in a dialogic manner, as discussed above, there may be cases where participants ask that their transcripts be released to a broader public so that they may share their stories more widely and fully with other researchers.
- A scholar may determine that some forms of data collected during the course of this research is sufficiently anonymous and public that sharing it will not compromise participants' safety, etc. in any way. For example, copies of pamphlets distributed by political dissidents at a public protest.

This list of examples is clearly not exhaustive, but it indicates some cases where data collected in the course of research with marginalized/vulnerable populations may be “share-able.” But in these (and any other) cases, it is ultimately up to the researcher to determine the extent to which this is advisable or desirable. In making this calculation, however, we generally question the broader utility of such (or any) data sharing, as definitions of shareable data vary widely. As Mala Htun notes, for a significant number of scholars, “data” exist, not in field notes or transcripts, but “in the act of spending time with and listening to people.”⁹

III. Costs and risks

This section outlines the costs and risks associated with the distinct forms of transparency discussed above. Broadly, we are concerned that transparency imposes undue costs on vulnerable and marginalized populations with no clear gains. However; in addition to posing risks to vulnerable and marginalized research participants, we also offer a discussion of the costs and risks that are – and would increasingly – be posed to researchers, and to the field more broadly, given more explicit demands from journals for researchers working with vulnerable and marginalized populations to share sensitive primary source data.

Sharing primary source qualitative data: Costs and risks for vulnerable and marginalized populations

While there are considerable benefits to promoting and ensuring transparency with regard to the research process, approach and analysis, particular care must be taken for research with vulnerable and marginalized populations. Protecting research participants' privacy, confidentiality, and identity is of paramount importance and no pursuit of transparency should be undertaken that risks jeopardizing participants' security and peace of mind.

The risks associated with sharing primary source data depend greatly on the specific forms of vulnerability and marginalization research participants face. If participants face political persecution or are rendered vulnerable *through* their disclosure of sensitive information, risks of being identified in any form must be taken extremely seriously. If participants are identifiable in any form through the release or discussion of research materials, or even through the presentation of anonymized data, they and/or their families, communities and other networks may lose their jobs, be stigmatized and/or criminalized, or face any number of other risks. Some

⁹ Mala Htun notes (7th April 2016).

forms of vulnerability are immediately visible to researchers and reviewers (members of political opposition parties in authoritarian regimes, armed combatants in rebel organizations, or victims of violence and persecution). Others, however, are less visible. Ordinary civilians with knowledge of corruption, for example, are one population who are made vulnerable by knowledge or information they possess. Others still may not be vulnerable in the political climate in which the research was undertaken, but a change in regime or a changing political environment may suddenly pose new and unanticipated risks to research subjects. Information that was shared in good faith and with peace of mind at one point in time, may be highly sensitive in a different political climate. It is thus the duty of the researcher herself to determine the fluid potential for risk and make transparency decisions accordingly.

Although advocates who favor sharing research materials argue that primary source data could be anonymized, “anonymization becomes a very tenuous problem” (Price 2015). While it is relatively straightforward to securely anonymize data shared in the (relatively small) space of a research article or book manuscript, it is much more challenging to thoroughly anonymize large batches of data (Kahraman). When the community is small and the researcher herself is known to local populations, those familiar with the subject population, or government officials who have undertaken surveillance of the researcher during her time in the field, may be able to identify participants whose names have been removed by virtue of phrases they use, events they reference or context they provide. When Lake (2017) was conducting research on war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Democratic Republic of Congo, often interviewees spoke to her about the specific military dynamics of war crimes incidents and human rights violations that only certain individuals were privy to. Should she have published any of these details, or even alluded to these events or pieces of information, it would have been feasible for interested and knowledgeable parties to identify where the information came from, no matter how thoroughly primary source data was anonymized. Elsewhere, in conducting research with victims of violent crime, many women confessed to Lake that they had been raped but that their husbands were unaware of the fact. While data appears anonymous to the study’s broader readership, in a small community where people knew who Lake interviewed and when in a given research period, it would be hypothetically possible to draw links between interview transcripts and admissions or testimonies such as this, even if visible identifiers were removed.

In addition to political or physical risks to research subjects’ security, researchers must also consider the peace of mind of her participants and the stress that requests to publish data or transcripts might cause to them. Interviewees or other research subjects might already be edgy or nervous about meeting with a researcher. However, in a context in which trust has been built, research participants might have confidence that the researchers is familiar with the context. Opening an interview with a disclosure or request for transparency may disrupt the participant’s faith in the competence of the researcher and cause them stress, worry or concern. It may further undermine their confidence in the study and their willingness to be forthcoming. In order to mitigate these dynamics, researchers should feel confident going into research with vulnerable and marginalized populations that there will be no undue demands for greater transparency than the researcher deems appropriate. Under certain circumstances, it could be viable to release details of research participants or primary source data (for example, if the topic is uncontroversial and is unlikely to ever be controversial, and bears no relationship to the specific forms of vulnerability and marginalization faced by research populations). However, in general,

researchers working in delicate or sensitive research environments should err on the side of caution.

Costs to researchers of explicit demands to share data (as encapsulated by JETS)

Finally, we would like to consider some of the costs of institutionalized primary source data-sharing for researchers working with vulnerable and marginalized populations specifically. Scholars working with such populations could face tremendous barriers to publication if their work is not even considered for peer review because they will not share the details of their primary data and the editors do not consider their reasons for restricting the data to be legitimate. The DART statement claims: “If cited data are restricted (e.g., classified, require confidentiality protections, were obtained under a non-disclosure agreement, or have inherent logistical constraints), authors must notify the editor at the time of submission. The editor shall have full discretion to follow their journal’s policy on restricted data, including declining to review the manuscript or granting an exemption with or without conditions. The editor shall inform the author of that decision prior to review.” This potentially places a striking disincentive on the decisions of junior scholars to embark on research with vulnerable and marginalized populations for whom data cannot be disclosed, and face the risk of producing potentially unpublishable work.

As Sheena Greitens notes (20th April 2016), “my strong impression from the [graduate qualitative methods] seminar is that the existence of this debate and the resulting lack of clarity over standards seems to *already* be having a non-trivial deterrent effect on their willingness to pursue qualitative research (or even to invest in further training in it). The peer review process seems uncertain enough to them without the added question of what a particular journal will consider sufficient transparency -- particularly when journal editors appear to have wide discretion on standards that have a large impact on them (are interview notes going to be ok? or are full transcripts the only acceptable option? how would they know ahead of time?), including over whether to accept protocols that the University's IRB has required them to follow. And given finite time and perceived high job market pressure, the extra time required to transcribe/scan/upload interview or archival material is seen as enough of an added cost that concentrating on quantitative work that can be produced more efficiently with fewer questions seems like a much better strategy for success in the field”. On this point, scholars may be disinclined to pursue work with vulnerable and marginalized populations for whom they know that satisfactory details cannot be released but cannot be confident that journal editors and reviewers will have a deep enough knowledge of the fieldsite to share this sense of potential risk. This may be especially true where particular forms of vulnerability – such as the potential for future political regime change – is unforeseen by the research participant herself in addition to editors, readers and reviewers. Readers may question why transcripts cannot be released, while the researcher herself has a strong sense of why.

Parkinson and Wood (2015) observe that, due to the risk of non-publication, researchers may face a conflict of interests in the field. The chances of publication are greater if researchers convince interlocutors to agree to digital deposit regardless of the topic of inquiry. They ask, “how could the Middle Eastern activists referenced above give informed consent for a researcher to publicly deposit interview transcripts, given that they could not possibly know in 2011 that

they would be targeted by a future regime in 2015?” Given that subjects themselves may not be aware of the present and future risks associated with the information they are providing, this places an even greater burden on research to protect research subject confidentiality at all costs, even, sometimes, in spite of so-called informed consent offered by research subjects who have limited understanding of the dangers they might face. Parkinson and Wood note that a guarantee of security is impossible given that it is unknown and unknowable what will happen in five years. They add: “To the extent that journal editors and reviewers widely endorse the DA-RT principles, early career scholars face a kind of Sophie’s choice between following long-institutionalized best practices designed to protect their subjects (thereby sacrificing their own professional advancement), or compromising those practices in order to get published in leading journals.” These incentives are likely to have a crippling effect on violence research and research with vulnerable populations, given that it is often graduate students who face the strongest incentives to need to publish their work in leading journals in order to advance professionally. It is also graduate students who are able to spend long periods of time conducting embedded ethnographic fieldwork. Discouraging early-career scholars from investing in risky or contentious research with vulnerable and marginalized populations is likely to severely impede the field’s substantive knowledge of violent contexts.

This statement indicates that there is a procedure in place for acknowledging that some data are confidential. In addition, this statement leaves wide discretion for the journal editor to determine which types of data are worthy of being restricted and which populations can be considered vulnerable or at-risk. Concerns were raised in the online discussion board about examples of editors pressuring authors to provide confidential data because they were not convinced that the security of research participants could be jeopardized. It is understandable that editors should have discretion over the standards for their journal or press. However, editors must take into account the varied sources and forms of vulnerability and marginalization, and the range of reasons for restricting data access on these bases.

V. Recommendations for practice:

Valued current practices:

Practices that are currently widely used and widely accepted as valuable research practices.

Explaining the empirical foundation & logic of inquiry. The prevailing wisdom concerning the meaning of transparency rests on making visible “both the empirical foundation and the logic of inquiry of research”. There is already a dominant norm within political science scholarship to do just that. Indeed, if a researcher fails to make visible the empirical foundations and logical inquiry of her work, it is unlikely to be taken seriously by journal editors, and certainly not by reviewers. With some obvious exceptions, the peer review process is generally fairly effective at vetting and evaluating claims on the basis of evidence gathered. This works differently in different epistemological traditions. For instance, for the vast majority of quantitative work, transparency means offering a detailed description of the methods employed, the data collected, and the analysis conducted. It frequently also means the sharing of raw data in order to facilitate replication and verification. Many journals have in place procedures for replicating models once raw data is submitted.

The standards are similar for qualitative work, although the particular details of implementation may vary. For qualitative work, transparency almost always requires a detailed description of the argument and/or its testable implications. Almost always, it includes a detailed description of the evidence on which the claims were developed. Almost always, it includes a justification of case selection; a clear description of the methods used; and why those methods were most appropriate for evaluating the claims made or for generating new theory.

Peer Review. Peer review is a widely-used way of vetting academic work. It is also generally considered a higher standard than non-peer-reviewed publications. Peer review typically requires researchers to devote significant attention to explaining each step of the research process, and the decisions researchers made along the way. In theory at least, reviewers are attentive to the planning and preparation undertaken for the study, the methodological rigor demonstrated in any chosen research method, the substantive and area expertise of the author, and the care taken in engaging involving the ethical considerations of the research. Given that there is widespread recognition that researcher positionality, experience and knowledge often contributes holistically to the conclusions drawn, there is an implicit assumption that transparency concerning the decisions taken at each step of the research process allows other scholars to engage in similar research practices.

IRB. University Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) similarly require researchers to explain in detail all research undertaken with human subjects. Many IRBs demand that researchers describe in detail how subjects will be recruited, how information will be presented to them, and how data will be treated while the study is ongoing and after its conclusion. IRBs also typically require that particular care and attention is given to vulnerable or marginalized populations, including minors, pregnant women and prisoners.

These practices help research communities to ensure that research studies are grounded in rigorous and well-thought through research designs that are appropriate for the questions asked. They assist readers from all backgrounds to evaluate the claims of the article. And they endeavor to protect research subjects from harm. These practices are central to the advancement of scholarly knowledge and to the integrity of academic research. However, in practice, decisions can fall to reviewers and editors with varying levels of expertise or interest, and determined by IRBs with varying degrees of rigor and expertise. IRB review (like peer review) is a process that involves humans and therefore is subject to the vagaries and idiosyncrasies of the particular human involved in any given review. Much of this is inevitable but to the extent that we can spread broadly-used standards and a shared understanding of what transparency means for different kinds of research, we may be able to balance out some of the inconsistencies. Because at the moment, transparency is frequently subject to author, reader or reviewer discretion, which does not lead to consistent (or fair) applications.

Low-cost improvements/innovations:

Emergent, innovative, or adapted practices that are not currently in wide use but that may prove to be valuable for many research designs and that, when intellectually appropriate, could be carried out at modest cost and without significant risk to human subjects.

Given that scholarship in political science is so varied in scope, method and substance, it is evident that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to research transparency. Any innovation or

improvement is therefore highly contingent on the type of research being undertaken and the nature of the question under investigation. Nevertheless, given this variation, there are a number of low cost improvements that build on the broader objectives of fostering transparent and ethical research articulated in the previous section. Improvements fall to a variety of stakeholders, including journal editors; authors; readers and reviewers; and the broader scholarly community (for example, faculty and graduate student colleagues, graduate mentors; conference discussants; and audience members).

Towards the goal of advancing transparency in qualitative research, we recommend the following low-cost actions that journal editors, reviewers, and readers can take to maintain research integrity:

- **Note the conditions of research.** Journal editors and reviews should pay close attention to the conditions under which qualitative research was undertaken. All submissions should be sent to at least one, if not two, area specialists, and at least one, if not two, subject matter experts. We recognize that this is no easy feat. Scholars can help in making area expertise clearly known on their websites. APSA could host a database of area studies experts. While the peer review process certainly has its flaws, area experts are often easily able to identify whether or not the premise of the research and the methods employed are credible. The selection and availability of appropriate area and subject-relevant reviewers is therefore the most important action that can be taken to advance the goals of research transparency.
- **Determine if the researcher is transparent about his or her process.** Second, with the goal of advancing a broad understanding of transparency as discussed in Q1, journal editors and reviewers should also consider the transparency of the research as it was undertaken. Currently, editors do very little to enforce ethical norms for the research they publish (even as far as asking whether authors received IRB approval). However, editors should be engaged in asking questions such as: “did the researcher make clear the goals of the study to her research subjects and participants?”; “did she make clear the goals of her study to the broader community in which she was working (and of not, why not)?”; “was the researcher clear in her explanations of the costs and benefits of the research to her research subjects? How did research subjects respond to the perceived costs and/or benefits of the research?” “How did researchers’ subjects evaluate the positionality and objectives of the researcher?” “How did interviewees’ or research participants’ perceptions of the researcher likely affect the conclusions drawn?”. Not only do these types of questions aid readers in understanding the premises under which data were gathered, but they also help shed insight into how transparent the research was to those participating. Subject-focused transparency is important for empirical and ethical reasons. For empirical reasons, it helps readers to understand the context in which information was obtained (and how subjects understood the nature of the information given). For ethical reasons, it broadens the field’s conceptualization of transparency to include research populations and promotes the overarching value of research integrity. This is crucial for advancing knowledge and understanding over the longterm, since trust from research populations is crucial for continued research.
- **Accountability outside of peer review.** Third, graduate mentors, discussants, and readers and audience members more broadly can hold researchers to account for the work

that they produce. This means asking these same questions outlined in the previous bullet point with regard to all qualitative research. Readers and audience members more broadly should also pay close attention to the academic value of the research vis-à-vis potential harm posed to research subjects, populations and communities. Questions to be asked by consumers of research include: “what are the benefits of the research project in furthering scholarly knowledge?” “In what ways is the research likely to lead to harm for participant populations and communities and how can these harms be mitigated?”. Responsibility for asking these questions should not fall to IRBs alone, since IRBs vary significantly from institution to institution. Therefore, in a world with plentiful online resources, publishers should consider the submission of comments on each article’s official webpage (as is already done in the AEA’s *American Economic Journal*).

- **Expand understandings of “vulnerability.”** Readers, editors and IRBs should expand their understanding of vulnerability to include a broad range of circumstances and populations. Limiting vulnerability to IRB-driven definitions-- minors, pregnant women and prisoners-- is deeply damaging for the goals of understanding potential harm that might arise. There are a variety of ways in which harm can come to research subjects and populations, and conditions of vulnerability can change with changing political climates. Authors, reviewers, editors and consumers more broadly should consider all ways in which the research in question could create vulnerabilities, either in the present and in the future. Research that poses a harm to research subjects or populations in any capacity should not pass peer review unless its benefits can be clearly demonstrated to outweigh the potential harm. Harm need not be physical or immediate: it could be psychological and it could be cumulative. For instance, if the same research population has been visited time and time again by researchers, while no individual study poses a significant risk of harm, the cumulative effects of researching particular populations should be taken into account.
- **Researcher honesty.** Researchers themselves should continue to be up front and transparent about the ways in which they describe and present their research to a variety of different audiences, including, most importantly, subject populations and readers. Authors should make crystal clear the goals of the research, and should be transparent in the ways in which they recruited participants, the information they communicated to them, and the nature in which the research was conducted. Recruitment materials and research materials can be provided in supplemental appendices where appropriate.

Inadvisable practices:

Practices that the Working Group strongly discourages, at least for particular kinds of research or research contexts. Practices in this category would also be ones that the Working Group would strongly advise journal editors, reviewers, granting agencies, and others not to set up as norms or standards even if individual scholars might find them useful in their own work.

Scholars working with marginalized and vulnerable populations largely agree that sharing raw interview data, field notes or observational materials should be treated with extreme caution, noting the damaging repercussions that raw data may have, for research subjects, research communities, for researchers and for the future advancement of knowledge. While in certain very specific cases, the sharing of raw data to a data repository or in an online appendix could be appropriate, this depends heavily on the nature of the research question and the context in which the research was undertaken. Therefore, in the interest of both protecting research participants

(especially those who are vulnerable and marginalized) and maintaining transparency, we *discourage* the following practices:

- **Assuming that all data may be made public.** A blanket expectation that data should be made public except where exempt sets an unreasonable, unrealistic and unfair threshold for scholars engaging in sensitive research, particularly in challenging research climates or involving vulnerable or marginalized populations. For many populations, the mere mention of making data public will be enough to render an entire interview or interaction closed or redundant, by radically altering the content of any future conversation. If a researcher understands so little of the community in which she is working that she poses the question of publishing research transcripts to a research subject, this could be sufficient to render the entire research conversation meaningless. Moreover, such a practice discourages the most ethical of researchers from undertaking sensitive research (for fear that they won't adequately be able to protect the confidentiality of their sources) and creates incentives for those less concerned with ethics to place their research subjects at unnecessary risk or in positions of discomfort (Wood and Parkinson 2015).
- **Having one standard (norm) for data disclosure.** A uniform standard of disclosure, with exemption for sensitive research, is deeply discouraged. In addition to incentivizing research with certain subject populations, vulnerability and marginalization are contingent and incredibly hard to assess or define in isolation of the specific research project. Further, because of the absence of a clear definition of vulnerability and marginalization, editors, reviewers and researchers may disagree about the need to release primary source materials to an online platform. As we have recently observed in the context of our own changed political climate, or that in Turkey or Egypt, research subjects who are not considered vulnerable at one point in time, might face exposure or increased risk once the political context changes. This undermines the idea of informed consent as a basis for transparency or disclosure of primary source materials. Researcher discretion is paramount, and any nature of sensitive research should err on the side of protecting the identities of subject populations rather than on meeting a predefined and decontextualized norm of transparency.
- **Exemption for sensitive research.** The issue of exemption also places an unfair burden on junior scholars. Junior scholars, or those facing publication pressures, may be disinclined to engage in sensitive research that stands a lower chance of publication given the need to request an exemption from journal editors. Given that exemptions must be obtained ex-poste, such research is incredibly risky from a publication stand point. Perhaps one of the most damaging consequences of this, is the risks posed to graduate students. While it is typically graduate students who have the time to devote to extended embedded field research, it is also graduate students who are likely to face intense pressure to get work published in advance of the job market. Many graduate students will be disinclined to engage in work they perceive as risky. Some of the most careful and important work with vulnerable populations has come from graduate students who have the time to build trust in communities and become deeply embedded in research communities. Closing down this avenue of scholarship would do a great disservice to knowledge.