

The opportunities and challenges of pre-registration in qualitative research

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Three things to take away...

- ① **Pre-registration** of qualitative research is still in its infancy.
- ② Pre-registration has costs and benefits. It's not for everyone!
- ③ Pre-registration encourages the researcher to carefully reflect and systematically report on their design and analytical choices, including those made as the study progresses.

Outline

- **What** is qualitative pre-registration?
- **Opportunities**: Why would I want to do that?
- **Challenges**: Why would I want to do *that*?
- **Application**: How could that look like?

What is qualitative pre-registration?

6. *Researchers have an ethical obligation to facilitate the evaluation of their evidence based knowledge claims through data access, production transparency, and analytic transparency so that their work can be tested or replicated.*

(APSA “Guide to Professional Ethics”)

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“In this joint statement, leading journals commit to greater data access and research transparency, and to implementing policies requiring authors to make as accessible as possible the empirical foundation and logic of inquiry of evidence-based research.”

(Joint Editor Transparency (JET) Statement)

What is qualitative pre-registration?

→ Many suggested tools for qualitative research so far focus on **transparency later in the process**.

e.g. active citation (Moravcsik 2009), sharing interview transcripts, field notes, interview appendices (see *UK-DA*, *Qualitative Data Repository*), replication (Becker 2020) etc.

→ **Replication** is controversial and difficult in qualitative inference.

What is qualitative pre-registration?

- Scholars should not just assert their conclusions, but **must also share their evidence base** and explain how conclusions were reached.
- Qualitative empirical inquiry has historically taken a **minimalist approach** (different to quantitative research)
 - Because of **immersive concerns**.
 - Because of rights and **welfare of participants**.
- **Openness** allows scholars to show that a particular piece of research was well designed and done correctly.

What is qualitative pre-registration?

Scientific fraud (Dougherty 2021)

A violation of that trust occurs when qualitative researchers misuse the practice of confidentiality and anonymity to produce fraudulent works. Proving that a researcher has fabricated fieldwork findings under such circumstances is quite difficult. In a widely publicised case involving political anthropologist Mart Bax, the official investigating committee could only conclude that the allegations of qualitative data fraud were ‘highly plausible’ (Baud et al., 2013: 17). In the words of the committee members, ‘it has been impossible to find supporting evidence or sources’ for the basic fieldwork claims (Baud et al., 2013: 17). Bax was found to have committed scientific misconduct, and retractions have been issued for some of his works (Ferguson, 2014; Marcus, 2020). The academic community failed to realise the problem with his research in a timely way, in part because of his use of anonymization techniques. Bax delayed scrutiny of his research for years by claiming ‘to be protecting informants by using pseudonyms and inventing geographical names for his field sites’ (Sandberg and Scheer, 2020: 6; see also Margry, 2020).

What is qualitative pre-registration?

“**Preregistrations** – records made a priori about study designs and analysis plans and placed in (open) repositories – are thought to strengthen the credibility and transparency of research.” (Haven et al. 2020)

→ Exists in various fields, mostly quantitative design-focused, platforms such as COS/OSF.

What is qualitative pre-registration?

- Researchers **record designs and intended methodology**, etc. in an electronically searchable and accessible public database; **timestamped and identifiable** (possibly gated).
- Employed to **pre-specify** research questions, theories, hypotheses, variables, data sources, sampling procedures, survey questions, data analysis procedures, models, etc

What is qualitative pre-registration?

- This is less about data transparency, and more about **production transparency, analytic transparency**, reliability and validity.
- An **early- and mid-stage** transparency tool, complementing others.

Opportunities



Opportunities

- ① Encourages the researcher to **carefully reflect on different study aspects** and to systematically report on their design and analysis choices, including those made as the study progresses.
- ② Records about the study design and analysis plan **help the reviewer or user of the study in understanding and assessing the study's findings.**

Opportunities

Benefits

- Increasing **transparency**.
- **Avoiding “fishing”** of data and results.
- Helping researchers to **specify their designs** in advance.
- Increasing the **confidence in results**.
- Reducing **conflicts of interest** with policy collaborators.

Opportunities

→ Device for **commitment** *and* **communication**.

→ Distinguishing **exploration** from **testing**.

Opportunities

- Especially useful for **empirical** qualitative studies.
- Instead of replication → **reliability**.
- Insights into the **procedure of qualitative inference**.
- Credible reference to “surprising” findings.
- Increased transparency even in case of **sensitive data**.

Opportunities

Qualitative pre-registration could be good for:

- Hypothesis-testing vs. hypothesis-generating
- Case studies
- Process tracing
- Qualitative interviews or focus groups
- Computer-assisted analysis
- Mixed methods design

Challenges

Challenges

“The form is fierce.” (Alex Hartman)

Challenges

- The same protocol does not apply across studies.
- Too rigorous pre-registration stifles exploration.
- Robotic hypothesis-testing.
- Full pre-specification is impossible.
- Sensitive data.

Challenges

- ① **Space constraints** that hinder full presentation of all steps in qualitative research.
- ② **Costs of pre-registering** and the right of first usage (of ideas, designs, etc).
- ③ **Ethical concerns** about protecting human subjects.
- ④ A potential **chilling effect** of transparency on certain types of research topics.

Challenges

Can transparency really make fraud impossible?

No. But it can make fraud **detectable**.

Application: how?

Application: how?

Pre-registration in qualitative research (Haven et al 2020)

Study information Research aim(s)

Please specify the overall purpose(s), objective(s), or aim(s) of the research. If helpful, please select the type(s) of aim. Examples include, but are not limited to: * exploring, * describing, * theory evaluating * comparing * understanding
In addition, please reflect on whether your aim is different across different domains (e.g., knowledge generation, policy development, community resourcing). If so, specify your aim for each domain that is relevant for your study.

Research question(s)

Please specify your research question(s) as they are guiding your research now. If relevant, you may also specify here any hypotheses to be assessed. The research questions may break down your aim into smaller, distinct inquiries. If relevant, you may distinguish between primary and secondary research questions or hypotheses.

Anticipated duration

Please indicate the estimated project start date (mm/yyyy) and estimated project end date (mm/yyyy).

Application: how?

Pre-registration in qualitative research

Design Plan

Study design

Please provide a brief, overarching characterization of the study design. Your response might consist of a succinct label (e.g., “case study” or “ethnography”) and/or a brief elaboration of that label’s meaning. A study may involve a combination of different designs, including a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Sampling & case selection strategy

Please describe your sampling or recruitment strategy (examples include, but are not limited to: purposive, snowball, theoretical, and maximum variation sampling) and/or your case selection strategy (examples include, but are not limited to: typical case, most similar case, most different case, diverse case, and deviant case).
Please provide a short rationale for why you selected this type of strategy.

Application: how?

Pre-registration in qualitative research (Haven et al 2020)

Data Collection	Data source(s) and data type(s)	Please describe the source(s) and type(s) of data you will be using. In describing the data, distinguish between data that existed prior to your study (e.g., archival documents, newspaper articles, [social] media, secondary literature, or data collected for a different purpose than the current study) and original data (i.e., data that will be collected/generated for the current study).
	Data collection method(s)	Please describe your method(s) of data collection or data generation. Examples of methods include, but are not restricted to: interviews, focus groups, enabling techniques, self-reports, field notes, diaries, (participative) observation, archival research, or mixed methods. <i>Please provide a brief rationale for why you plan to use each particular data collection/ generation method in your study.</i>
	Data collection tool(s), instrument(s), or plan(s)	Please describe or upload the tool(s), instrument(s), or plan(s) you will use in collecting or generating your data. Examples could be, but are not limited to: topic guide, interview questionnaire, focus group guide, observation scheme, creative tools (e.g., photos, videos, musical pieces, paintings, etc.), or a description of your archival search plans.
	Stopping criteria	Please describe the criteria or rationale behind when you will stop data generation or collection. Possible criteria include, but are not limited to: data saturation*, when inclusion criteria are satisfied, resource constraints (e.g., time/funding), or when the analysis has produced an enriching answer to the research question(s). <i>* We follow Fusch & Ness (2015) and interpret saturation to be reached when there is enough information to replicate the study, the ability to obtain new information has been attained, and further coding is no longer feasible.</i>

Application: how?

Pre-registration in qualitative research (Haven et al 2020)

Analysis Plan

Data analysis approach

Please specify the type and details of your data analysis approach. Examples of approaches include, but are not limited to: narrative analysis, phenomenological analysis, thematic analysis, content analysis, psychoanalytic analysis, grounded theory, process tracing, comparative analysis, or discourse analysis.

If multiple interpretations of your approach exist, please specify the version you will be using.

Please provide a rationale for why your selected data analytic approach is appropriate given your study's aim(s).

Data analysis process

Please describe what your process of data analysis will look like. Questions to keep in mind could be, but are not limited to:

- * who will be involved in the data analysis, and in what role?
- * if relevant, indicate any procedures that will be used to turn “raw” data into analyzable form (e.g., a coding scheme)
- * if relevant, indicate any evidentiary criteria that will be used to assess any hypotheses (e.g., what evidence will count as consistent or inconsistent with a given proposition)
- * if relevant, what software or analytic tools will you use and how will you use them?

Application: how?

Pre-registration in qualitative research (Haven et al 2020)

Credibility strategies

Please specify the strategies, actions, or measures you will employ to assure methodological integrity. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- * member checking
- * triangulation with other data sources
- * bringing in different perspectives
- * have different researchers analyze the data
- * consensus building among team members or “interrater reliability”
- * negative case analysis
- * peer debriefing
- * cross-checks for rivaling explanations
- * bring in an “auditor”
- * reflexivity
- * verisimilitude,
- * emotionality,
- * personal responsibility,
- * an ethic of caring,
- * political praxis,
- * multivoiced texts,
- * dialogues with subjects

Please provide a short rationale for why you selected particular strategies and how they are appropriate given your study's aim(s) and approach.

Application: how?

Pre-registration in qualitative research (Haven et al 2020)

Miscellaneous

Reflection on your
positionality (optional)

Feel free to reflect on your relation to* or association with the studied phenomenon and your position in the research setting/field, including your academic/personal standpoints, assumptions and values. In addition, if there is a potential conflict of interest that can arise, you may want to report that here.

** whether you have a previous relationship with the studied phenomenon and if you consider that there are previous positions or assumptions that may influence the present study.*

Application: how?

Application: how?

Think about your own project, how would that look like?
Take the template uploaded to the website and ask yourself how your own future (or current) work would fit the template.

Application: how?

Concerns? Questions? Inspirations? Rage?

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