

# Reflexive Openness as Collaborative Methodology

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In 2019, I co-published a working paper titled “Research Ethics and Human Subjects: A Reflexiveness Openness Approach” (MacLean et al. 2019). The essay was the result of a collaborative enterprise, borne of our individual participation in the American Political Science Association (APSA) Qualitative Transparency Deliberations (QTD), sponsored by the Qualitative and Mixed-Methods Section (APSA 2015; Jacobs et al. 2021). Our argument was hardly novel for political scientists who learn from people, whether through interviews, surveys, and participant observation, and with those who do not consent to participate in our work, including research assistants, government officials, community members, and other interlocutors. We stated, “...the first duty of scholars is the ethical treatment of people affected by our research, particularly its human subjects” (MacLean et al. 2019, 1). Our argument was narrowly focused on the relationship between research ethics and human subjects, in part because that was our charge as members of one of 13 QTD Working Groups. More important, our collective professional experience working in violent and repressive settings equipped us to collectively address questions of research transparency while foregrounding the primacy of human subjects. In our working paper, we drew insight from political ethnographers working interdisciplinarily to advance “a broad and distinct approach of ‘reflexive openness’” (MacLean et al. 2019, 1). This article extends this collaboration to explain why political scientists should be concerned with reflexive openness in their work with human participants.<sup>1</sup>

I describe our concept of reflexive openness to demonstrate its relevance for collaborative methodologies, following the definition provided in this symposium introduction: Collaboration “...is a mode of working *with* research stakeholders rather than *on* research subjects” (Firchow and Gellman 2021). This notion of “working *with*” is central to the practice of reflective openness, which we define beyond the minimum standard of ethnographic reflexivity.<sup>2</sup> I demonstrate why reflexive openness is a necessary baseline component of collaborative practice. To do so, I extend our three-part definition of reflexive openness as more than an ongoing form of researcher self-assessment. It provides an avenue to greater self-reflection on the ethical dimensions of fieldwork with human subjects—who are our collaborators. Moreover, the practice of reflexive openness generates a deeper awareness of the power dynamics that often mark various relationships in

the field. Reflexive openness also can enhance the trustworthiness of the data and the integrity of the research project in ensuring more accountability for the argument and claims made, in turn potentially enabling reviewers, editors, and other readers to better evaluate the work (Gellman 2021; Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Thomson *forthcoming*).

## WHAT IS REFLEXIVE OPENNESS?

Beyond the now generally accepted utility of fieldwork to study politics and questions of power (Schatz 2009), reflexive openness asks political scientists of all empirical stripes to foreground sustained reflection on ethical practice in our work with human subjects. At its core, reflexive openness requires scholars to understand the relationships that underpin our research as part of an iterative process of knowledge co-production. As such, I understand reflexive openness to be both a process and a product of researchers’ ongoing self-assessment of how their work is unfolding in terms of goals, strategies, and design, along with an accounting of amendments made along the way. Said otherwise, reflexive openness asserts a minimum standard of ethical practice beyond the approval of a researcher’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). This matters because some political scientists approach IRB approval as a procedural checklist of consent, confidentiality, and so on, rather than as a product of an ethical sensibility (Fujii 2012, 717; Thomson 2013a, 14; Thomson 2013b; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012).

Reflexive openness therefore is more than the theorizing of researchers’ role in the production of knowledge. It also must include—as we collectively advanced in MacLean et al. (2019)—three additional commitments on the part of researchers, without which the work is neither collaborative nor reflexively open. First is recognition that research is a continuous process rooted in researchers’ self-examination of their relationships to research participants and the broader context in which the research is conducted, from the design and implementation stages. Second, beyond the field and during the publication process, researchers provide a clear and compelling statement on the ethical choices they made during fieldwork, preferably in the body of the text. Third—and for me perhaps the most important for its expansive definition of “the field”—the principle of reflexive openness “is universal” in that it stands “regardless of subfield, methodology, topic, and empirical context” (MacLean et al. 2019, 1). As our working paper argues, taken together, a commitment to reflexive openness incorporates these principles before, during, and after fieldwork

while also engaging editors in a dialogue on publishing statements of ethical practice (MacLean et al. 2019, 10–13, 15).<sup>3</sup>

I understand reflexive openness as an epistemological stance, in which the creation of academic knowledge is coupled with research ethics in the sustained “...negotiation of social relations essential to research with participants” (MacLean et al. 2019, 11). For me, reflexive openness embodies a flat ontology, meaning that throughout the research process, the knowledge of both the researcher and the researched is equally valued and weighted (Häkli 2020). Although the goal of putting the knowledge of both parties on an equal footing often is difficult to achieve, researchers can seek—as part of their reflexively open practice—to portray those who participate in their research as knowers of their own lives. The caveat is to ensure that this more-equitable footing does not put participants in harm’s way (MacLean et al. 2019, 15–17). In this way, reflexive openness contributes to the decolonial turn in the social sciences, broadly understood as research focusing on how colonial systems of power affect the lives of once-colonized peoples and in collaboration with these individuals and communities (Leonardo 2018; Mama 2000; Mbembe 2000;

or foreign humanitarians. Central to this mode of understanding politics and power from the perspective of those who are subject to it are systematic and careful efforts to recast the distinction between the researcher-as-authority and the participant-as-subject. In narrowing this distinction, reflexive openness deepens and makes plain what scholars already know but sometimes take for granted: that academic knowledge develops from specific social and political contexts and in collaboration with a variety of actors, most notably the people who consent to take part in our research.

Context—whether historical, political, social, or otherwise—is a critical factor in challenging what we think we know, or what we think we need to know, about a particular event, place, or people. Such knowledge is best gained in collaboration with a host of actors and, indeed, primary and secondary sources, including archival work, as we read for misrepresentations or silences, to ask why our research participants’ lives are presented as they are. Reading “against the grain” in this way provides an avenue for reflexively open collaboration to precede fieldwork. It allows political scientists to foreground the human, to situate individual lives into larger (and perhaps

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Smith 2012). A commitment to reflexive openness also can provide “insight into people’s relationships with each other and with power” to remind political scientists, and the broader discipline, of the complexity of being human and that the humanity of our research participants is best understood and explained through collaboration (Parkinson 2018, 39).<sup>4</sup>

#### HOW IS REFLEXIVE OPENNESS COLLABORATIVE?

The discipline has already begun to embrace the primacy of relationships in research, as evidenced by APSA’s April 2020 “Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research.”<sup>5</sup> Reflexive openness is a collaborative methodology because it heightens a researcher’s awareness of relationships as the product of collaboration in all stages of the research process—from design to dissemination—each stage of which is marked by its own ethical concerns (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Lake, Majic, and Maxwell 2019; Thomson 2009; forthcoming).

As an ethical sensibility, reflexive openness as collaborative enterprise requires both patience and flexibility on the part of researchers to work with their participants. “Working with” asks the researcher to commit to humility and to carefully building—and maintaining—the relationships that are the foundation of any collaborative project. In my work, I draw on more than 15 years of collaborative research practice with conflict-affected individuals in Kenya and Rwanda. I have been motivated by an intellectual curiosity and personal desire to study and document the lives of people who historically would otherwise remain unknown or whose stories are told—often narrowly, incorrectly, or without context—by local elites

grander) national histories, as I did in my first book (Thomson 2013a).

Indeed, as social scientists know well, the production of knowledge is preceded by what we think we know—that is, our biases and assumptions—which in turn determine our methodology and methods. The practice of reflexive openness can illuminate the intellectual distinction among epistemology, methodology, and method as the foundation of collaboration. With whom and how we collaborate is a product of our understanding of what counts as knowledge and who holds it (Harding 1987; see also Krystalli 2021). In this way, reflexive openness asks political scientists to think deeply through and write carefully about their epistemology—specifically, who can know what and under which circumstances valid political science knowledge can be (co-)generated, without essentializing our participants. Method is a technique for gathering and analyzing information that becomes data through reflexively open interpretation. Information is gathered by listening, watching, and studying documents and other materials (e.g., film, newspapers, and websites). Researchers then organize data through the conceptual frameworks that we, as scholars committed to collaboration, bring to the information to look for patterns or themes. The choices that researchers make of how to use these methods (e.g., interviews, focus groups, and archives) are their methodology.

Drawing on my publications as an example, I contribute to the interpretative tradition of political science (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). My scholarship is focused on understanding how systems of power structure the lives of

individuals and how those who are subject to power experience it in so-called times of peace. This concern means that I draw on a number of disciplines, including anthropology, feminist-security studies, history, law, and politics. My main source of data is fieldwork (methodology), meaning that I talk to people (epistemology) who have experienced violence

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about those experiences using life history and semi-structured interviews (method). I also draw on archival material where it exists (i.e., state and non-state, print, electronic, and visual) to contextualize what people tell me and to put their narratives in historical perspective (method). My research uses these sources to offer a glimpse of everyday life after violence to provide nuanced, and often first-person, analysis to dominant narratives of how mass violence occurs and what is needed for individuals and communities to recover from it (methodology).

This brief scholarly biography illustrates that political science field research is not different than that undertaken by colleagues in cognate disciplines. In this regard, a commitment to reflexive openness also is a commitment to read beyond our discipline to plumb relevant insights from other literatures. Questions of power and ethics are fundamentally human questions, not those that are unique to political science (Fujii 2012). At the same time, it bears mentioning that the discipline of political science can be elitist (particularly in the United States) about who is able to do fieldwork, where they go, the types of questions they ask, and which methods and approaches they employ—some of which are far more valued in the discipline than interpretivism.

Understanding the line between method and methodology emerges as a reflexively open space to work out how we can do what we do, with whom, and how. Central to the distinction between method and methodology is making collaborative space for self-dialogue about reflexivity and positionality (Bouka 2015; Soedirgo and Glass 2020). Thinking deeply and in a sustained way about the role of self in all phases of the research process allows us to ask questions that mediate our positionality as part of collaborative work, lest researchers misunderstand or undervalue their role in producing knowledge that is co-created with their participants and other interlocutors (Vlassenroot 2020). For example, what type of assumptions underlie how we approach the field, the questions we ask, the relationships we make, and how we listen to and engage with research participants and others? Is the way that we gather and interpret data consistent with how we think knowledge should be created or disseminated, or with how our participants think their knowledge should be documented and published? Moreover, to whom among our participants and interlocutors do we owe an answer? Is how we interpret our data to make claims about the way things are consistent with what our collaborators told us?

These questions raise thorny ethical issues that deserve consideration in graduate methods courses; by dissertation, hiring, and promotion committees; and by journal and book editors. It thus follows that as part and parcel of a reflexively open practice, researchers do not have the right to intervene in people's lives without considering the power implications

of what they are doing and why. No one is obligated to speak with us; neither should we force ourselves into their lives to ask questions that further our career without benefit to our participants. My body of work addresses these questions in varying degrees because a reflexively open sensibility is a practice that takes time to develop, both personally and professionally (Ansoms, Bisoka, and Thomson forthcoming; Thomson 2009; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2019). At the same time, it requires humility and patience because those who are reflexively open must remain open to the idea that collaboration can challenge our findings, especially when our participants dislike or disavow our analysis of their lives (Quatrini 2020).

In my work, reflexive openness has been a collaborative exercise that highlights the challenges and opportunities of research as a social activity involving human interactions. Even archivists engage other researchers, curators, and archivists; none of us works alone. In embracing the complexity of their humanity, researchers also must include in their ethics statements and findings the difficult emotions that often belie the tidy research narratives that write-up and dissemination often require. Guidance on doing so is available in the Vision Statement of the current (and all-female) editorial board of the *American Political Science Review* (American Political Science Association 2020).<sup>6</sup>

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Reflexive openness is a practice and a sensibility. It stands as potentially revolutionary for the mainstream discipline of political science, as a bold step toward a discipline that values nontraditional ways of knowing and doing. It asks researchers to reflexively engage the ethical implications of their work for themselves, for their participants, and for other field-based relationships at all stages of the research process, from design to publication. To practice reflexive openness is to embrace uncertainty and to welcome an attitude of wonder and humility to the research process while remaining committed to self-reflection as a form of personal and disciplinary accountability that may slow the overall time to publication. In cases in which the risks of publication are too high for our human subjects, reflexive openness as collaboration method provides an avenue to withhold our findings from publication while we work with our collaborators to determine when and if they can be published and where and when.

At its center, reflexive openness is collaborative in the narrow sense of “working with.” If the concept is to take root

in political science, we must commit to work through difficult and perhaps uncomfortable disciplinary conversations to flatten the hierarchies of knowledge and difference that characterize the Western academy, starting with colleagues who supervise and mentor graduate students, hiring and promotion committees, and editors.

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## NOTES

1. In our working paper, we purposefully use the term “human participants” instead of “human subjects” to avoid the suggestion that participants are subordinate to the researcher and to illustrate the agency of individuals to choose to participate in our research. See Clark-Kazak (2007) for an analysis of whether marginalized or vulnerable individuals can ever truly consent; c.f. Thomson (2013c) on gaining consent in her project with Somali refugees living in Nairobi.
2. Reflexivity is “a keen awareness of, and theorizing about, the role of the self in all phases of the research process” (Schwartz-Shea 2014, 133).
3. We are careful to assert “that it is the researcher who is best placed to make [...] ethical and methodological decisions” on whether publication would compromise the ethical commitments made to participants (MacLean et al. 2019, 15). We also note that editors may best be able to determine if the researcher has acted unscrupulously “vis-à-vis the wellbeing of research participants” (MacLean et al. 2019, 16).
4. Political scientists have begun to embrace the emotional costs and personal process by which they choose their research topics and decide on how and with whom to work. This is a welcome addition in line with the ethics of reflexive openness. For examples, see the prefaces of Autesserre (2021), Lemarchand (2021), and Thomson (2013a, ix–xxi).
5. The document is available at <https://connect.apsanet.org/hsr>. Both Thomson and Wood were appointed members of the Ad Hoc Presidential Committee on Human Subjects Research, which began its work in September 2017.
6. Ackerley et al. (2020), writing as the incoming journal editors of the *International Journal of Feminist Politics*, also provide a clear and compelling editorial statement on research ethics that all editors would do well to consider.

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