Research Transparency and Open Science: Can We Have Too Much of a Good Thing?

by

Jeffrey T. Checkel
European University Institute and Peace Research Institute Oslo
jeffrey.checkel@eui.eu

Abstract: As social scientists, we live in an era when the rigor of our research is under scrutiny. Our response has been a series of initiatives, proposals and policies. This is appropriate and good, but it begs the question: at what cost?

In this paper, I argue that in moving quickly from the broad principle of open science to its operational instantiation – the Data Access and Research Transparency initiative, the Journal Editors' Transparency Statement, for example - we have not considered all the consequences. In part, the problem is epistemological, with key parts of the interpretive tool kit – positionality and situatedness – not being included in calls for greater transparency. However, the bigger issue are the trade-offs and opportunity costs as we pursue open science. More time devoted to research transparency means less time for other important things we do as social scientists. Scholars will be incentivized to craft less ambitious research designs and adopt a simplistic approach to theory. The latter problem is especially worrisome, as it will reinforce trends to adopt a 'pull-it-off-the-shelf' approach to theory development.

One can indeed have too much of a good thing. Although greater transparency is needed, we must place any required practices in context, assessing their impact on the broader research enterprise.

I.   Introduction

The debates, discussions and policies on transparency that have played out across the discipline over the past 8 years – from the data access and research transparency initiative (DA-RT), to the new transparency policy adopted by many journals (Journal Editors' Transparency Statement 2015), to the qualitative transparency deliberations (QTD) – are to be welcomed. As an empirically oriented international-relations (IR) theorist, I am well aware that we too often fail to use our methods in a transparent and clear manner. Yet, the discussions have both overshot – JETS is a policy in search of a problem – and underperformed, neglecting meta-theory and opportunity costs.[1]

This paper focuses on these gaps, addressing epistemology and the trade-offs at work if we make our methods and causal logic more transparent. I refer to the latter as opportunity costs. My argument is two-fold. For one, meta-theory matters. We need to appreciate better that epistemological starting points other than positivism offer important insights and tools to the transparency debate. I highlight what interpretism teaches us about the key role of positionality in transparency.[2]

Just as important, there is no such thing as a free lunch in the data-access/transparency debate. There are costs and trade-offs to consider if we add more method and transparency to the lunch menu. In particular, there will be less theory. Of course, there will still be theory, but it will be derivative and pulled off the shelf. In IR, this will accelerate trends - already quite evident over the past decade - to think small theoretically. Most IR theory has – or should have –

---

[1] For background and context on the DA-RT/transparency debates, see Symposium (2014); Symposium (2015); and Symposium (2016).
[2] Interpretism has played only a minor role in the various transparency debates - for example, figuring in only one of the 12 QTD working group final reports (Working Group III.2).

theory, methods, ethics, data and empirics. Over the course of a research project, more time and intellectual space devoted to one of these parts will result in less of the others.

The paper proceeds as follows. It begins with a discussion of epistemology and what ethnographers can teach us about how reflections on positionality are also needed if we wish to improve the validity and transparency of our causal inferences. I then turn to opportunity costs, suggesting that more methodological transparency will lead to less time and intellectual space for theory, ethics and – yes – even methods. I illustrate my concerns by considering the debate over Bayesian process tracing, where proponents argue that its application can make key aspects of the method more transparent.

I offer one caveat before beginning. This essay is not the work of a disgruntled European interpretive IR theorist. I do live and work on the Continent, but by training (physics as a first degree; a PhD at MIT) and inclination, I am a scientific-realist: a close relation to positivism, but with a processual understanding of causality (Wight 2013). My goal here is not to uncover some positivist plot behind DA-RT; the critiques are offered in the spirit of reform, not revolution.

II. Meta-Theory and Methodological Transparency

For a positivist, in some important sense, seeing is believing (Johnson 2006). Consistent with this core epistemological tenet, much of the DA-RT/transparency debate and recommendations have come down to some version of 'show me the goods.' This might mean archiving one's data in qualitative data repositories (Mannheimer, *et al* 2019); or using active citation (Moravcsik 2010); or attaching numbers to our causal hunches in process tracing to make the logic behind them more visible (Bennett 2015). These are all sensible proposals, but they are premised on a separation between the researcher and what she studies – something again consistent with the positivist world view.

Let me consider the case of interviews in more detail, arguing that there is an additional layer of transparency we need to consider – one with an interpretive starting point, which shrinks the distance between the researcher and her subject. A popular proposal to increase the transparency of interviews is to utilize active citation, where a footnote citing an interview is linked to a transparency index that contains interview transcripts or excerpts. A reader - by perusing the index - can better understand the evidence behind a causal claim the author advances in her text (Moravcsik 2014).

If we stop at this point, however, we are missing important additional information that allows us to understand the interview excerpt and what it is telling us. As ethnographers would argue – and interviews are a key method for them as well (Gusterson 1996; Gusterson 2008; Holmes 2009) – one needs to reflect upon how that interview data has been shaped and changed by the researcher. How has her/his gender, skin colour, identity and the power relation inherent in the interview affected how the interviewee answered? In ethnographic/interpretive jargon, this is to reflect upon one's positionality – and how it has influenced both participants in the interview (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009; see also Borneman 2014).

Returning to active citation's transparency index, then, more than the raw data would be required. We also need to see – in a positionality index? – how a researcher thinks the interview answers/dialogue were a function of her gender, the way she asked a question, and the like. Here, transparency is defined not by what we see, but by clarification of context and researcher-interviewee interaction. Reflecting on positionality also pushes a researcher to consider the ethical dimension of her work. For a transparency debate that has too often failed to take ethics seriously (Parkinson and Wood 2015; Monroe 2018), this can only be welcomed.

My argument is not to do away with active citation and transparency indices; rather, we need an additional – more foundational – layer of transparency. For the latter, the late Lee Ann Fujii's work on relational interviewing provides excellent advice - from a fellow political scientist no less - on how to establish one's positionality in an interview context (Fujii 2017; see also Fujii 2010). If Moravcsik's transparency index allows us to see the data, a positionality index helps one better understand the social process through which that data was constructed.

III.   Opportunity Costs and Transparency

If meta-theory is an issue that has received insufficient attention in recent debates over transparency, then the matter of opportunity costs and trade-offs is notable by its near absence (Zaks 2020, 14-15, for a rare exception). If we spend more time on methods and transparency, what do we lose? What are those proverbial roads not taken? These issues can be addressed at the level of an individual scholar (her research design), of a method itself (what comes to constitute its core features), and of the discipline (are there more pressing issues we should be addressing).

A. Doing the Research

IR scholars build their research on theory, methods, ethics, data and empirics. The transparency initiatives of the past decade ask us to spend more time on those methods, making their use more clear and operational, and how we use them to advance causal claims. When doing this, we need to ask two questions: (1) is the resulting research better? and (2) what have we foregone in going the extra transparency mile?

Is the Research Better? How would we know? It is clearly too soon for the various transparency tools to have been implemented by large numbers of scholars. Personally, I have seen – for example – only a few publications using active citation and transparency indices, and

it is not clear their use results in better research. Moreover, the effective use of active citation means we know how to deal with non-English-language sources and determined cheaters. Many of us – in the English-speaking political-science/IR world - do field work in foreign settings. If I upload my German or Russian interview transcripts to a transparency index, nothing is transparent; the language is wrong! So, for active citation to work, do we first need to translate everything to English? If so, how much transparency is lost through the imperfect art of translating?

My bigger concern is the determined cheaters. The point of a transparency index is to upload and post that part of an interview transcript providing support and context for the causal claim a researcher makes in the main body of the publication. But what is to stop him/her from cherry picking, where excerpts that undercut the causal claim are not uploaded? To prevent this, one could require that entire interview transcripts be posted. However, this is both unrealistic and ensures no one will ever look at a transparency index.

In sum, Jack Snyder's assessment of active citation still rings true. 'Active citation is a good research practice, but it is not a silver bullet of causal inference, and it is not the most important tool for demonstrating the rigor of qualitative research in political science' (Snyder 2014, 709).

Consider another transparency initiative: the use of Bayesianism to improve and make more visible the logic behind the causal inferences we make in process tracing (Bennett 2015; Fairfield and Charman 2017; Fairfield and Charman 2019). Bayesian logic enables and makes more transparent causal inference from iterative research – such as process tracing. Within the process-tracing literature, this is arguably the research frontier. A number of leading scholars support it and Bayesian process tracing is being taught widely - for example, every year in the

process-tracing modules at the Syracuse Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR) and the Short Courses held in conjunction with the annual convention of the American Political Science Association (APSA).

Does the use of Bayesianism result in better, more rigorous and transparent applications of process tracing? Proponents cautiously answer in the affirmative (Fairfield and Charman 2017), while critics argue that the application of Bayesian logic is undercut by a number of logical and practical challenges (Zaks 2020). My own view accords more with the critics.[3]

Indeed, I would argue that the addition of Bayes' logic to process tracing does not improve the end product, and one sees this in three different ways. First, Bayesian logic cannot work with inductive forms of process tracing, as you have no (deductively derived) theoretical priors to which values can be assigned. This was a limitation recognized early in the debate (Bennett 2015, 276), but has since been forgotten. What do we make then of some of the stellar examples of inductive process tracing such as Wood (2003)? Wood's book is a model of a transparent application of process tracing. She did not use Bayesianism back in 2003. Even if she could retrospectively apply it now, it is highly doubtful the result would be a more rigorous form of process tracing.

Second, applying Bayesian logic and its accompanying mathematical formulas requires the assignment of estimated probabilities on the prior likelihood a theory is true as well as the likelihood of finding evidence (in two different ways). Bayesian analysis is impossible without these three estimated probabilities, which are derived in a subjective manner lacking any transparency.

---

[3] As of late-August 2020, Andy Bennett, Andrew Charman and Tasha Fairfield were drafting a response to Zaks' article, which was first published on-line in May 2020. When complete, it may change the tenor of my analysis, but likely not its deep skepticism toward the application of Bayesianism.

Bayesian process tracers are aware of this problem (Bennett 2015, 280-81), but it is not clear how one fixes it. Maybe we need a transparency index (another one!), where a researcher explains what data she drew upon to fix a certain probability, assuring us that cognitive bias played no role, and that she did not cherry pick the data to get a probability that will make her favored theory work. I am, of course, being facetious here. But the lack of attention to this process of assigning estimated probabilities simply pushes to a deeper level the transparency challenges that process tracing faces.

Third, much of the application of Bayesianism to date has been to process-tracing greatest hits, especially Wood (2003) and Tannenwald (2007).[4] Yet, none of Bayesians who replicate Wood or Tannenwald demonstrates where the Bayesian approach improves the process tracing. As Zaks argues, 'Wood and Tannenwald are excellent data collectors, analyzers, and writers - skills that consistently prove to be the most central assets to good (and transparent) process tracing. Until Bayesian proponents can demonstrate where their method reveals new conclusions or more nuanced inferences, the costs of adoption will continue to outweigh the benefits' (Zaks 2020, 14).

In the end, Peter Hall – in an early intervention in the DA-RT, transparency debates – got it right. The best theoretical-empirical qualitative research already does most of that for which proponents of enhanced transparency ask. And if it does not, we have peer-review processes and scientific research programmes that usually ensure a particular author does take methodological transparency seriously (Hall 2016).

---

[4] Although see above. It is not clear how Bayesianism can even be applied to Wood's inductive process tracing.

What have we foregone? The answer here is based on no hard data, for there is none. Rather, my concern is that the push for transparency will intersect with broader disciplinary trends, incentivizing researchers to de-value theory in their research / research designs.

In IR theory, we have – odd as it may sound - a theory problem, and various publications and researchers have decried this fact. In 2009, IR scholars established a new journal – *International Theory* (*IT*) – in part because of dissatisfaction with the quality of theory in the sub-field's leading journal, *International Organization*. In *IT*'s first issue, the editors argued that there should be more emphasis in IR theory on 'original contributions … [that] add new theory rather than … test old theory' (Snidal and Wendt 2009, 9). In September, 2013, the *European Journal of International Relations* (*EJIR*) devoted an entire special issue to 'The End of IR Theory?' (Wight, Hansen and Dunne 2013).

In that same year, two leading realist/rationalist IR scholars published an article bemoaning how simplistic hypotheses testing had replaced theory in much of IR (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013). If Mearsheimer and Walt's target was quantitative IR scholars, then qualitative IR has a different but equally troubling theory problem. For too many of these scholars, theory has been replaced with non-cumulable lists of causal mechanisms (Checkel 2016). This has led one leading IR theorist to note that mechanisms seem to have become 'the mother of all isms' (Bennett 2013).

Reflecting this frustration over the state of theory in IR, the forthcoming 25th anniversary special issue of the *European Journal of International Relations* is structured around the editors' call for theoretical innovations that can lead 'to genuine renewal of the issues we cover across the subfields of IR and how we think about them' and identify 'thinking and methods, conceived

in inter-disciplinary terms, that we might need to better understand and address these emerging questions and challenges' (The Editors, 2018).

To paraphrase that renowned IR scholar - Austen Powers – we would appear to have lost our theoretical mojo. The pointed critique first offered over 20 years ago - 'Is Anybody Still a Realist?' (Legro and Moravcsik 1999) – can now be updated and broadened: Is anybody Still an IR Theorist? My own experience as a reviewer reinforces this updating. Over the past decade, I have reviewed over 70 IR manuscripts for the journal *International Organization*. For the 80% of these that got a reject or revise & resubmit, the major weakness was the theory – typically that it was derivative or simply someone else's theory 'pulled off the shelf.' If this is the state of IR theory today, how do debates and policies over DA-RT and transparency fit into and interact with this saga?

If we go back to an individual scholar's IR research project and design – with its theory, methods, ethics, data and empirics - my concern is the various DA-RT/transparency initiatives and policies (JETS) will incentivize younger scholars to spend more time on methods. And more time on the latter means less for something else: theory, in this case. An anecdote suggests the opportunity costs and trade-offs are real. At a panel devoted to DA-RT at the 2018 Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association, one scholar recounted consciously scaling back his/her level of theoretical ambition to make enough intellectual space to accommodate DA-RT concerns - and still comply with the word count limit. Given the broader pressures diminishing theory's role in IR, it is highly likely that in future years the more method / less theory trade-off will be evident in more than anecdotes.

B. Getting the Method Right

For any qualitative method, are there opportunity costs in seeking to make its application more transparent? For one method – process tracing – the answer would appear to be 'yes'. My argument here is backed by extensive teaching of the method (19 PhD workshops, APSA short courses, intensive doctoral seminars over the past 5 years) and research on it (Bennett and Checkel 2015).

At core, process tracing is all about a special kind of data - on the observable implications of one's causal mechanisms. Usually – but not always – this data gathering happens in the field. Without these goods, as it were, no other aspect of process tracing is possible – say, data analysis using Bayesian logic. This data collection usually places the process tracer in close contact with human subjects, which raises – or should raise – issues of research ethics. In turn, ethics raises an epistemological issue. Since they are usually better addressed by interpretivists, perhaps ethics are downplayed in process-tracing because we have failed to develop interpretive forms of it.

The paragraph above suggests a three-fold agenda for process tracing: within-process-tracing methods; ethics; and developing an interpretive variant. Yet with a few exceptions, we are not publishing, let alone teaching, on these topics. Instead, the courses at key fora (European Consortium for Political Research [ECPR] methods schools; Syracuse Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research; APSA short courses) consist of process tracing basics plus sessions on formalization – be it the application of Bayesian logic, set theory (Barrenechea and Mahoney 2019), or causal graphs (Waldner 2015).[5] Within the process-tracing literature, 55% of the journal articles, newsletter contributions and book chapters since 2017 have been devoted in

---

[5] The data on course content comes from my own involvement in some of the teaching plus a perusal of on-line syllabi/course-descriptions. See also Zaks (2020, 2).

whole or in part to formalization.[6] For process tracing as method, this emphasis on formalization in teaching and research creates opportunity costs.

       Within-Process-Tracing Methods. Going forward, we must devote more pedagogy and research to the methods needed to do process tracing well. When teaching the method, I am struck that most students think it starts when we measure those observable implications of a causal mechanism. But the data for measuring those mechanisms comes from somewhere – typically, interviews, ethnography/political ethnography, archives, and surveys. There is an entire literature devoted to these various within-process-tracing methods (Mosley 2013; Kapiszewski, MacLean and Read 2015; Schatz 2009; Trachtenberg 2006, chapters 2, 5; Bryman and Bell 2019, chapters 5-7), and we need to be teaching it in our courses. Nearly everyone holds up – as they rightly should – Wood (2003) as a process-tracing exemplar. It is a model because of the richness and quality of her data, gleaned from interviews, political ethnography and her ethnographic map-making workshops (Lyall 2015, 189-191). These were all methods she had mastered and without which her exemplary process tracing would not have been possible.

       For process tracing as method, we need to make time (in our teaching) and space (in our research) for these data-gathering methods. Zaks (2020, 14-15) nicely captures what is at stake here.

In the context of qualitative research, scholars have a lot more access to training in the analysis of data than they do in the research processes that get them the data in the first place. But the process of research and the processes we are researching are inextricable. Researchers would likely yield greater benefits from intensive training in ethnographic, interview, and sampling

---

[6] For the period 1.17 – 8.20, I searched: (1) the journals *Political Analysis*, *Perspectives on Politics*, and *Sociological Methods & Research*; (2) publications listed in Google Scholar for Tasha Fairfield, Andrew Bennett, Derek Beach, and James Mahoney; and (3) the International Bibliography of Social Sciences database. Key words used were process tracing, Bayesian, set theory, formalization and qualitative methods. The search resulted in 20 articles, book chapters and newsletter contributions on process tracing. Of these, 11 – or 55% - dealt in whole or in part with formalization, understood as Bayesianism, set theory, or causal graphs.

techniques; understanding the politics and biases associated with archival work; or even just additional and specialized language training needed to conduct research on a specific topic.

For process tracers, this means less training on analysis (Bayesianism, set theory) and more on within-process-tracing methods.

Ethics. Teaching those additional methods as a part of process tracing – and especially the interviews, field work and ethnography - would drive home the need to address and operationalize the research ethics of the method. This is a topic on which process tracers have been largely silent.[7] In process tracing's less scientific days, I would often tell students that it gets you down in the trenches and really close to what you are studying. This is true, and the 'what' is often policymakers, activists, civil-war insurgents, and the like – human subjects in ethics talk.

We do not need a separate research programme on the ethics of process tracing, but we should teach more about how one operationalizes the challenging ethics of more immersive within-process-tracing methods such as interpretive interviewing (Fujii 2017) and ethnography (Wood 2003; Wood 2006). A side benefit of this ethics teaching is that it inevitably forces a scholar to confront her positionality in the research process. As argued above, this is a missing element in our debates over transparency and data access. At a minimum and since transparency is currently much discussed among process tracers, we need to build modules into our process tracing curricula on the ethics/transparency relation and how we operationalize core ethical precepts (do no harm) in an era of open science. In making this pedagogical move, there is a rich and growing literature upon which we could draw (Parkinson and Wood 2015; Fujii 2017; Monroe 2018; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018).

---

[7] Looking back, my biggest regret with Bennett and Checkel (2015) was its near total neglect of ethics.

Interpretism. Why is there so little teaching and research on interpretive process tracing? When Bennett and I were conceptualizing our 2015 volume on the method, we purposely created an epistemological big tent for it (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 10-16), one open to interpretive variants. Yet, interpretive process tracing is taught virtually nowhere, perhaps because our leading process-tracing texts have almost nothing to say about it in a practical, operational manner (Bennett and Checkel 2015; Beach and Pedersen 2019). This is odd, for interpretism in political science and IR has become increasingly interested in process, conceptualizing it as social practices (Neumann 2002; Adler and Pouliot 2011; Adler and Pouliot 2015).

However, I am aware of only a handful of published works on interpretive process tracing (Guzzini 2011; Guzzini 2012; Norman 2015; Pouliot 2015; Norman 2016; Robinson 2017; Cecchini and Beach 2020). This small literature is quite diverse and there is no agreement on what constitutes an interpretive form of the method. For some (Norman 2016), interpretive process tracing is similar to mainstream, scientific-realist efforts, but operates inductively. Others (Robinson 2017) favor a stronger grounding in an interpretive meta-theory, but it is not clear what the actual process tracing does.

My own view is that Pouliot's practice tracing is the most promising (Pouliot 2015). True to an interpretive ethos, he crafts a process tracing that operates inductively, but also takes some effort to show us how it would work. Pouliot does the latter by engaging with Bennett and Checkel's (2015, chapter 1) ten best practices for process tracing, and how they must be modified to work interpretively. His resulting practice tracing occupies a meta-theoretical middle ground, showing how practices create meaning (interpretism), but also thinking hard about how to measure the process through which those practices operate (scientific-realist).[8]

---

[8] The most exciting theoretical-methodological work occupies precisely this epistemological middle ground. See Hopf (2002), Hopf (2007), Pouliot (2007), Hopf and Allan (2016).

In sum, for process tracing as a method, there is a rich pedagogical and research agenda we could pursue that would deepen it (within-process-tracing methods), broaden it (interpretive forms), and create a space for ethics. Instead, we have devoted significant (and increasing) intellectual resources to formalization and transparency initiatives. There is nothing wrong with the latter. There is a reason why Andy Bennett and I chose the subtitle 'From Metaphor to Analytic Tool' for our 2015 Cambridge book. At that point, process tracing was typically employed in an ad-hoc, informal manner lacking any transparency. I cannot speak for Bennett, but I thought we fixed the transparency issue with that volume. The community of process tracers would seem to disagree – witness the now extensive literature seeking to formalize the method.

Maybe we need further formalization, but we should do this with an appreciation of the likely opportunity costs. We may get a more rigorous, transparent version of one particular type of process tracing: deductive, scientific-realist/positivist. But we are missing an opportunity to develop a richer, more plural method.

C. The Discipline

Since the DA-RT and transparency initiatives got underway in 2012-13, the discipline (political science), professions (APSA and, to a lesser extent, the ECPR) and many scholars have devoted significant time and effort to debating and further developing them, both individually (articles; conference papers; seminar presentations) and collectively (newsletter symposia; JETS policy; online fora such as <u>Dialogue on DA-RT</u>; Qualitative Transparency Deliberations).[9] Are issues of data access and methodological transparency really one of political science's biggest problems?

---

[9] JETS was not in fact a collectively agreed decision. It was a policy decided by 26 journal editors, in many cases without even consulting their editorial boards.

No one scholar can answer this question, but I do wonder. Others have as well. Already in 2015, Jeff Isaacs – then the Editor-in-Chief of *Perspectives on Politics* – launched a scathing critique of DA-RT, arguing that it was premised on a narrow understanding of science and was distorting our priorities in the profession (Isaacs 2015, *passim* and especially 276). The very next year, Lee Ann Fujii wondered why political scientists were nitpicking at data and method, while ignoring the racial and gender issues that plague the American academy (Fujii 2016).

It is now 2020 and we are still debating and further developing ideas on data access and techniques/procedures to enhance transparency. And in a very progressive manner, we are well beyond the early debates and discussions. For all my critiques of Bayesian process tracing, it is a clever way to enhance the rigor and transparency of the method, and Tasha Fairfield, Andrew Charman and Andy Bennett are to be commended for their efforts.

While recognizing the importance of this work, it does raise the issue of opportunity costs for the discipline. Time and energy on data and methods means we have less for other issues. When I reflect on the large amount of literature I review for journals, presses and funders, three problems – I rank order them below - jump out as issues we as a discipline and IR as a subfield should be addressing. First, we need to take theory seriously. It is not simply a matter of incorrectly putting method before theory; although, political-science/IR certainly is still guilty of conducting method-driven research (Gates 2008; Mearsheimer and Walt 2013; Checkel 2013, chapter 1). Rather, we need to stop 'pulling theory off the shelf,' tweaking the last person's argument. To be more precise, we should do this less often, as some theory tweaking is appropriate; it is the way research programmes advance and consolidate.

To take theory more seriously, a good starting place would be to revisit Rosenau's nine pre-conditions for creative theorizing. Some seem less important from today's perspective, but

one still stands out. 'To think theoretically one must be playful about international phenomena … to allow one's mind to run freely … to toy around' (Rosenau 1980, 35). The implication is to think outside the box, to get outside your comfort zone.[10] To enforce this edict, we could enact a JETS Mark II – The Journal Editors' Theory Statement. Why not? When I look at the list of the 26 journals who immediately signed up to the original JETS statement, they include many who indeed reduce theory to simplistic hypothesis testing (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013).

Second, we need to write better. Here, I know of what I speak. A first degree in physics left my social-science writing skills undeveloped, to put it mildly. My point, though, is very serious. Of what I review, a third of the submissions suffer from poor writing, where sentences are often way too long, paragraphs combine multiple ideas, and the overall writing style is dry, to put it politely. It really is possible to get your argument right, use your methods transparently and still tell your story in an engaging way.

Too often, this seems a lost art. A few years ago at the APSA convention, I shared a coffee with John Haslam, the main social science editor at Cambridge University Press (UK). At the convention – as we all know – the Haslams are rarely at the exhibition booth; instead, they are sitting off to the side, listening to a scholar pitch her book proposal. Over our coffee, Haslam was bemoaning the quality of the proposals he was getting from younger American political scientists. The problem was not the argument or the data. Rather, they were so poorly and dryly written that all life had been stripped from the project.

Third, we have a problem with the operationalization and transparency of the methods used in our research. I recently reviewed a large body of IR scholarship – mainly by constructivists – where my task was to assess how well they did with their methods. The answer

---

[10] Barnett and Duvall (2005) is a rare – IR – example of the type of ambitious, conceptually rich theory of which Rosenau would approve.

was mixed, but overall negative. In all too many publications, the methods were stated but never developed (operationalization), and the reader had little sense of how the use of particular methods allowed an author to advance causal/interpretive claims (transparency). We clearly need to do better (Checkel 2018).[11]

So, what to conclude, for the discipline? We clearly need to work harder at methods and data, but to do this in a context where we recognize there are other – competing – areas in need of attention as well. For me, this context is defined by additional – and larger – problems at the level of theory and writing style. To return to – and now answer - my essay's subtitle: Yes, we can have too much of a good thing. There are opportunity costs for the discipline if we spend too much time on DA-RT and transparency.

IV.   Conclusions

Our debates and discussions over DA-RT, JETS, and transparency have both overshot – JETS is a policy in search of a problem – and underperformed, neglecting meta-theory and opportunity costs. Nobody – at least in American political science – likes to talk about epistemology, and opportunity costs are hard to measure since we do not really know the alternatives. My arguments on the latter are based on counterfactuals (absent all the attention to DA-RT/transparency, the discipline's teaching/research would have looked different) and assume the research agenda is zero-sum (more time on methods and data means less on theory and ethics, say). If one disagrees with the counterfactuals or the pie-does-not-grow reasoning, my arguments can be questioned.

On epistemology, I argued that we need to do more, adding reflections on positionality to our transparency toolkit. Showing the data and making more transparent how we used methods

---

[11] This failure is likely related to the continuing lack of dedicated, PhD-level qualitative methods training in US political-science departments (Emmons and Moravcsik 2020).

to arrive at our claims is not enough. The data is not just 'there.' To use language any constructivist would endorse, it is co-constituted and socially constructed, at least when the research involves human subjects. To appreciate positionality's role, we thus need to broaden our epistemological horizon in debates over data access and transparency.

Regarding opportunity costs, my argument is the opposite: we need to do less. Let us dial back a bit all the efforts on methods and data and open some space for other issues – and policies. On the latter, the impossibility of my JETS Mark II (Journal Editors' Theory Statement) ever seeing the light of day tells us one of two things. My read of the discipline and its deficiencies are idiosyncratic and wrong. Or, we have not really thought hard enough about the opportunity costs arising here.

I end where the essay began. The critiques here were offered in the spirit of reform, not revolution. We *do* need to make our methods more transparent, but – at the same time - we need to keep our eyes wide open. Returning to my running example – process tracing – the method will undoubtedly benefit from the various efforts underway to make its analytic logic more rigorous and its applications more transparent. But we should also work on further developing its methodological, ethical and epistemological bases. The result will a better, richer and more plural process tracing, one that would be a worthy candidate for a second edition of Bennett and Checkel's 2015 volume on the method.

V. References

Adler, Emanuel and Vincent Pouliot. 2011. "International Practices." *International Theory* 3/1: 1-36.

-------. 2015. "Fulfilling the Promises of Practice Theory." *ISQ Blog* (December) (http://www.isanet.org/Publications/ISQ/Posts/ID/4956/FulfillingThe-Promises-of-Practice-Theory-in-IR; as of 05.09.20, URL not working).

Barnett, Michael and Raymond Duvall. 2005. "Power in International Politics." *International Organization* 59/1: 39-75.

Barrenechea, Rodrigo and James Mahoney. 2019. "A Set-Theoretic Approach to Bayesian Process Tracing." *Sociological Methods & Research* 48/3: 451-484.

Beach, Derek and Rasmus Pedersen. 2019. *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines, 2ⁿᵈ Edition*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Bennett, Andrew. 2013. "The Mother of all Isms: Causal Mechanisms and Structured Pluralism in International Relations Theory." *European Journal of International Relations* 19/3: 459-481.

-------. 2015. "Disciplining our Conjectures: Systematizing Process Tracing with Bayesian Analysis." In Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel. Editors. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press - Appendix.

Bennett, Andrew and Jeffrey T. Checkel. Editors. 2015. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Borneman, John. 2014. "Containment in Interlocution-Based Fieldwork Encounters: Thought, Theory, and Transformative Thinking." *Anthropological Theory* 14/4: 442–461.

Borneman, John and A. Hammoudi. 2009. *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and the Making of Truth*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bryman, Alan and Edward Bell. 2019. *Social Research Methods, Fifth Edition*. NY: Oxford University Press.

Cecchini, Mathilde and Derek Beach. 2020. "Bringing Back the Social: Interpretivism and Social Process Tracing." Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Convention, Virtual (September).

Checkel, Jeffrey T. Editor. 2013. *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Checkel, Jeffrey T. 2016. "Mechanisms, Method and the Near-Death of IR Theory in the Post-Paradigm Era." IR 2030 Workshop. Laramie, Wyoming: University of Wyoming (August).

-------. 2018. "Methods in Constructivist Approaches." In Alexandra Gheciu and William Wohlforth. Editors. *Oxford Handbook of International Security*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cronin-Furman, Kate and Milli Lake. 2018. "Ethics Abroad: Fieldwork in Fragile and Violent Contexts." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51/3: 607–614.

Emmons, Cassandra and Andrew Moravcsik. 2020. "Graduate Qualitative Methods Training in Political Science: A Disciplinary Crisis." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 53/2: 258-64.

Fairfield, Tasha and Andrew Charman. 2017. "Explicit Bayesian Analysis for Process Tracing: Guidelines, Opportunities, and Caveats." *Political Analysis* 25/3: 363-380.

-------. 2019. "A Dialogue with the Data: The Bayesian Foundations of Iterative Research in Qualitative Social Science." *Perspectives on Politics* 17/1: 154-167.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2010. "Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence." *Journal of Peace Research* 47/2: 231–241.

-------. 2016. "The Dark Side of DA-RT." *Comparative Politics Newsletter: The Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association* 26/1: 25-28.

-------. 2017. *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach.* London: Routledge.

Gates, Scott. 2008. "Mixing It Up: The Role of Theory in Mixed-Methods Research." Q*ualitative Methods: Newsletter of the American Political Science Association Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 6/1: 27-29.

Gusterson, Hugh. 1996. *Nuclear Rites: A Weapons Laboratory at the End of the Cold War*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

-------. 2008. "Ethnographic Research." In Audie Klotz and D. Prakash. Editors. *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Guzzini, Stefano. 2011. "Securitization as a Causal Mechanism." *Security Dialogue* 42/4-5: 329-341.

-------. 2012. "Social Mechanisms as Micro-Dynamics in Constructivist Analysis." In Stefano Guzzini. Editor. *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe? Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hall, Peter. 2016. "Transparency, Research Integrity and Multiple Methods." *Comparative Politics Newsletter: The Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association* 26/1: 28-31.

Holmes, Douglas. 2009. "Experimental Identities (after Maastricht)." In Jeffrey T. Checkel and Peter J. Katzenstein. Editors. *European Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hopf, Ted. 2002. *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities & Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

-------. 2007. "The Limits of Interpreting Evidence." In Richard Ned Lebow and Mark Lichbach. Editors. *Theory and Evidence in Comparative Politics and International Relations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan – Chapter 3.

Hopf, Ted and B. Allan. Editors. 2016. *Making Identity Count: Building a National Identity Database*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Isaacs, Jeffrey. 2015. "From the Editor: For a More Public Political Science." *Perspectives on Politics* 13/2: 269-83.

Johnson, James. 2006. "Consequences of Positivism: A Pragmatist Assessment." *Comparative Political Studies* 39/2: 224-52.

Journal Editors' Transparency Statement. 2015. "[Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT): A Joint Statement by Political Science Journal Editors](.)" *Political Science Research and Methods* 3/3: 421.

Kapiszewski, Diana, Lauren MacLean and Benjamin Read. 2015. *Field Research in Political Science: Practices and Principles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Legro, Jeff and Andrew Moravcsik. 1999. "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24/2: 5–55.

Lyall, Jason. 2015. "Process Tracing, Causal Inference and Civil War." In Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel. Editors. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press - Chapter 7.

Mannheimer, Sara, Amy Pienta, Dessislava Kirilova, Colin Elman, and Amber Wutich. 2019. "Qualitative Data Sharing: Data Repositories and Academic Libraries as Key Partners in Addressing Challenges." *American Behavioral Scientist* 63/5: 643-664.

Mearsheimer, John and Stephen Walt. 2013. "Leaving Theory Behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing is Bad for International Relations." *European Journal of International Relations* 19/3: 427–457.

Monroe, Kristen. 2018. "The Rush to Transparency: DA-RT and the Potential Dangers for Qualitative Research." *Perspectives on Politics* 16/1: 141-148.

Moravcsik, Andrew. 2010. "Active Citation: A Precondition for Replicable Qualitative Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 43/1: 29-35.

-------. 2014. "Transparency: The Revolution in Qualitative Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47/1: 48-53.

Mosley, Layna. Editor. 2013. *Interview Research in Political Science*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Neumann, Iver. 2002. "Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 31/3: 627-651.

Norman, Ludvig. 2015. "Interpretive Process Tracing and Causal Explanations." *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research: Newsletter of the American Political Science Association Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 13/2: 4-9.

-------. 2016. *The Mechanisms of Institutional Conflict in the European Union*. London: Routledge.

Parkinson, Sarah and Elisabeth J. Wood. 2015. "Transparency in Intensive Research on Violence: Ethical Dilemmas and Unforeseen Consequences." *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research: Newsletter of the American Political Science Association Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 13/1: 22-27.

Pouliot, Vincent. 2007. "'Sobjectivism': Toward a Constructivist Methodology." *International Studies Quarterly* 51/2: 359-384.

-------. 2015. "Practice Tracing." In Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel. Editors. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press - Chapter 9.

Robinson, Corey. 2017. "Tracing and Explaining Securitization: Social Mechanisms, Process Tracing and the Securitization of Irregular Migration." *Security Dialogue* 48/6: 505-523.

Rosenau, James N. 1980. *The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy, Revised Edition*. London: Frances Pinter.

Schatz, Edward. Editor. 2009. *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Snidal, Duncan and Alexander Wendt. 2009. "Why There is *International Theory* Now." *International Theory* 1/1: 1-14.

Snyder, Jack. 2014. "Active Citation: In Search of Smoking Guns or Meaningful Context?" *Security Studies* 23: 708-714.

Symposium. 2014. "Openness in Political Science." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47/1: 19-83.

Symposium. 2015. "Transparency in Qualitative and Multi-Method Research." *Qualitative & Multi-Method Research: Newsletter of the American Political Science Association Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 13/1: 2–64.

Symposium. 2016. "Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT)." *Comparative Politics Newsletter: The Organized Section in Comparative Politics of the American Political Science Association* 26/1: 10–64.

Tannenwald, Nina. 2007. *The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

The Editors. 2018. "*European Journal of International Relations*, 25th Anniversary Special Issue, Call for Contributions." E-Mail Mimeo (1 July).

Trachtenberg, Mark. 2006. *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Waldner, David. 2015. "What Makes Process Tracing Good? Causal Mechanisms, Causal Inference and the Completeness Standard in Comparative Politics." In Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel. Editors. *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press - Chapter 5.

Wight, Colin. 2013. "Philosophy of Social Science and International Relations." In Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth Simmons. Editors. *Handbook of International Relations, 2nd Edition*. London: Sage Publications – Chapter 2.

Wight, Colin, Lene Hansen and Tim Dunne. Editors. 2013. "Special Issue: The End of International Relations Theory?" *European Journal of International Relations* 19/3: 405-665.

Wood, Elisabeth J. 2003. *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

-------. 2006. "The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in Conflict Zones." *Qualitative Sociology* 29/3: 373–386.

Zaks, Sherry. 2020. "Updating Bayesian(s): A Critical Evaluation of Bayesian Process Tracing."
     Political Analysis (First View; accessed 26.08.20).