Quantitative and Qualitative Collaborative Methodologies

Collaborative Methodologies: Why, How, and for Whom?

Pamina Firchow, *Brandeis University*
Mneesha Gellman, *Emerson College*

What does it mean to collaborate with people affected by issues of interest to social science researchers? How can political scientists approach the people they study as research collaborators rather than as research subjects, and what are the implications of such a methodological shift for political science? This symposium on collaborative methodology (CM) discusses how and why we should meaningfully include those we research in our decision-making processes related to the methodological tools and research designs we use. Taking a pluralistic approach to both methodology and methods in terms of contributor expertise, the symposium spans both qualitative and quantitative as well as interpretivist and positivist traditions, in some cases fusing or blurring the lines of these methodological boundaries. In doing so, we offer best practices for CM—that is, the philosophy or epistemology that guides research practices—as well as for collaborative methods, referring to the specific tools that researchers use in ontologically guiding research processes to obtain data. Like other political science methodologies, CM is concerned "with the logical structure and procedure of scientific enquiry" (Sartori 1970, 1033) but with an emphasis on the philosophies and tools to understand the social and political world as it is conceived by the people living in it. In this symposium, contributors take a hard look at the benefits and pitfalls of collaboration, introducing CM methods and tools that could be useful for political science and drawing on a variety of geographical case studies, methods, and methodological orientations.

This symposium builds on the 2018 *PS: Political Science & Politics* profession symposium on community-engaged research methods (Michelitch 2018), which highlighted the importance of local engagement and collaboration in political science research, particularly across Global North/Global South lines (Bleck, Dendere, and Sangaré 2018; Thachil and Vaishnav 2018). These articles continue to explore lines of inquiry raised in that symposium, with a particular focus on concept development, data reliability, and accuracy in research that includes people affected by the themes of our research, as well as the ethics of care for the communities in which we operate.

Our goals as coeditors of this symposium are to provide a forum for discussion about the benefits and challenges of CM for political science researchers as well as for those we study, and to mitigate some of the shortcomings of both qualitative and quantitative political science data-collection methods. We explore the different approaches for collaborating with communities of interest and the challenges involved for political scientists. Our intention is to work toward closing the gap on methodological rigor in political science as well as concurrently decolonizing the discipline.

WHY COLLABORATIVE METHODOLOGIES?

We contend that political science data collection often is conducted at the expense of rather than to benefit the people whose lives are being documented and analyzed. CM in political science attempts to change the paradigm of conventional information extraction from marginalized or volatile communities for scholarly benefit and instead engage people as actors with agency rather than solely objects of research. This means that the people affected by the research puzzle are invited to participate in concept formation and methodological decision making, regardless of whether the methods are quantitative, qualitative, positivist, or interpretivist.

The centering of people as stakeholders in research designs rather than exclusively as data contributors attempts to upend past conceptions of what data collection means. Rather than the researcher positioned as expert descending on a community to source it for research subjects and data for theory building, CM places researchers as allies alongside those they research. In this way, researchers and everyday citizens can work together to develop more accurately the concepts and theories studied as well as the instruments necessary to measure those concepts, thereby avoiding some of the pitfalls of imposed conceptual frameworks.

In addition, CM works to empower communities that are being "researched" by allowing them the agency to participate in the studies being conducted about them. Thus, those political scientists who use CM naturally prioritize engaging the "real world" over exclusively addressing knowledge gaps in the literature (Michelitch 2018, 543). An unequal power dynamic between the researcher and the researched may be

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the American Political Science Association.

doi:10.1017/S1049096521000330

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521000330 Published online by Cambridge University Press

most visible when US-based researchers work in the Global South; however, class- and education-level–based schisms are equally worth considering—even for Americanists and other political scientists based in the United States who conduct domestic research and those who may be privileged in their own Global South countries or regions due to education or economic status. Privilege is intersectional and operates both across and within geographic communities. In short, wherever there are any power imbalances in social science research, CM can be a vital tool to address these shortcomings while also promoting the most accurate conceptualizations possible.

This symposium on collaborative methodology (CM) discusses how and why we should meaningfully include those we research in our decision-making processes related to the methodological tools and research designs we use.

Working with methodologies to address power inequities is not new in the social sciences. Colleagues in development studies have long used a discourse and toolkit of participatory action research (PAR) in their projects. Community-driven development is a basic tenet of poverty-reduction programming in international-development circles (Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein 2009, 287). In addition, disciplines including anthropology and sociology have long used ethnography and PAR as similar tools.

Yet, neutrality requirements routinely make it difficult for political scientists to be embedded in the communities where they conduct fieldwork. Researcher and community collaboration can contribute to biases in research that are not resolved easily and may distort the data produced by these approaches. Other challenges confronting CM researchers include decisions about who is included in research projects that use CM, as well as scaling CM to accurately make causal claims about larger populations, which often is necessary in political science. Collaborative data typically are not uniform across cases and therefore are difficult to generalize, presenting challenges to political scientists who hope to establish universal measures that remain constant over time or in developing comparative puzzles. Conflicts among communities necessarily arise about whether the results are accurately representative, inclusive, or valid even for the most fastidious CM researchers. These compromises may not be worth the risks involved in integrating collaborative methods into the political science methodological toolbox. The goals of political science to develop value-free, unbiased methodologies to identify causality have led to generations of political scientists trained in graduate programs that do not view collaborative methods as legitimate methodological approaches or do not prioritize inclusion regarding scientific research.

However, scholars have long raised questions about the consequences of political scientists' methodological choices, such as how they operationalize their variables and the utility and generalizability of their concepts to other contexts (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Gerring 1999; Goertz 2006). In addition, there has been little space to consider the impact on researched communities for political scientists who want to establish causality using quantitative and mixed methods (Bracic 2018, 552–53). Interpretivists trying to make their work conform as much as possible to disciplinary norms also tend to avoid collaborative approaches. Yet, when addressing difficult-to-define social concepts that may vary across contexts and cultures, we offer a straightforward intervention. We contend that it is important to consider the understanding and experiences of those living these concepts to be able to capture valid measures more accurately and eventually uncover stronger causal mechanisms. Moreover, such engagement demonstrates an ethics of care for researched communities that addresses historical and contemporary exploitation by external researchers.

CM in political science attempts to change the paradigm of conventional information extraction from marginalized or volatile communities for scholarly benefit and instead engage people as actors with agency rather than solely objects of research.

This symposium addresses issues of scholarly ethical obligations to researched communities in political science and focuses on CM as a way to potentially mitigate ethical issues that arise from data extraction in disadvantaged contexts. Collaborative research requires changing the framework of how we view the purpose of research: why, how, and for whom? Institutional Review Boards attempt to maintain human-subject protection; however, the resulting protocols not only are sometimes inadequate for addressing entrenched power hierarchies in the research process but also—by the very nature of rendering people as subjects—they re-create the extractive relationship that exists between researchers and research subjects. Moreover, many political scientists working with quantitative data do not ever set foot in the places they study or speak with study subjects. This distance between researchers and research subjects also is evident in the complex technical language used by political scientists when presenting their research results. Distancing from the research

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521000330 Published online by Cambridge University Press

subjects creates interesting ethical questions discussed by several contributors to this symposium.

WHAT ARE COLLABORATIVE METHODOLOGIES?

CM is not the same as PAR but may appear similar at first glance. PAR is defined by three central characteristics. First, PAR engages subjects as stakeholders who have a right to be involved in the process of research rather than simply extracting data and using it out of context (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006, 854–56).[1] In PAR's purest form, the research puzzle development is an open-ended and unstructured process, something clearly at odds with political science tenets. CM shares the commitment to involve stakeholders in research design but may do so in a way that is more structured than some PAR methodological purists might find comfortable.

Second, PAR addresses power hierarchies within research relationships, working to make them more inclusive (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014, 3). Such a commitment is shared by CM and is already visible across a range of methodologies in political science, with important contributions especially from interpretivist scholars including Fujii (2012), Pachirat (2018), Cramer (2015), and Schaffer (2016).

Third, PAR is committed to stakeholders and participants deriving action from an iterative process of reflecting on information that emerges from the research (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006, 854–56). This is perhaps the most significant deviation of CM from PAR. In keeping with principles of objectivity and open-ended inquiry in the research process, CM does not prescribe action as an inherent part of research projects (Gellman forthcoming). It is entirely possible that researchers may decide to become involved in action related to project findings, but this is not written into the framework of CM the way that it is in PAR. This clarification is vital for opening up the CM approach to political scientists, who traditionally have been wary of any consequent commitment to action because of concerns that with this expectation come commitments that may bias the research data.

To summarize, CM permits neutrality and testing approaches in political science research but requires researcher collaboration with everyday people throughout the research design phase and, in some cases, the data-collection phase. This collaboration facilitates accuracy and recognition of the importance of Indigenous Technical Knowledge generated by everyday lived experiences (Firchow 2018). In this way, we suggest that CM may be an avenue for closing the gap on conceptual rigor in political science.

THE VIABILITY OF COLLABORATIVE METHODOLOGIES AND METHODS

This symposium features contributors who are working with a range of methodological orientations and methods practices. The concept of "reflexive openness" is a product of collaboration, emerging from the American Political Science Association Qualitative Transparency Deliberation, first put forth in a working-group report that addressed alternative ways to maintain disciplinary rigor while avoiding the pitfalls of the Data Access and Research Transparency approach (MacLean et al. 2018). The report highlights the way that researcher identity should be visible not only in the research paradigm but also that examining how this identity affects the research is part of methodologically sound as well as ethical research. In her contribution to this symposium, Susan Thomson draws on her extensive collaborative research practice in post-conflict settings to make the case for reflexive openness as a necessary component of political science research.

Following her previous research on Indigenous memory politics and social movements relative to the formal-education sector (Gellman 2017, 2019), Mneesha Gellman is working collaboratively with the Yurok Tribe of Northern California and Zapotec communities in Oaxaca, Mexico, to address youth identity formation and resistance to culturecide—or cultural genocide—for students in public high schools. She discusses how collaboration has been a vital identifying element of her research in the mode of decolonization but also how it sometimes poses real logistical challenges. Her article identifies best practices in collaboration that can help researchers desist from neocolonial practices and move toward researching with rather than on Indigenous communities.

Jennifer Cyr provides critical interrogations of CM. In her contribution, she frankly engages with CM by considering the additional challenges that may come with incorporating a collaborative approach into a mixed-methods research design. Her article weighs the potential pitfalls of CM against the proposed theoretical, empirical, and normative payoffs. In so doing, she reflects on the question: What, really, is the goal of doing political science research?

To summarize, CM permits neutrality and testing approaches in political science research but requires researcher collaboration with everyday people throughout the research design phase and, in some cases, the data-collection phase.

Oliver Kaplan adds to Cyr's contribution by providing thoughtful skepticism. He argues that the activist power of research sometimes is generated through the partial independence of the analysis, which can enhance the credibility of findings for wider audiences. His article draws on research experiences in Colombia and other regions to lay out a path for incorporating the viewpoints of these actors while still conducting structured, positivist research that allows for claims to be falsified.

Gildfred Asiamah, Mohammed Awal, and Lauren MacLean discuss how collaboration during the pilot stage of their research project revealed a more effective method for investigating the salience of the concept of "climate change" to Ghanaian citizens. Their article highlights how collaboration can strengthen iterative conceptualization within projects as well as improve conceptualization and measurement between

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521000330 Published online by Cambridge University Press

studies. They reflect on the challenges and opportunities of collaboration for decolonizing political science research.

Relatedly, political science research commissioned by governments and international non-governmental organizations can be challenging for Global North political scientists who operate in conflict areas in the Global South. Yet, this issue rarely is discussed, in part because of the divide between academics and practitioners in the discipline. In their contribution, Drew Mikael and Julie Norman assess the implications of CM for commissioned research, including the conceptual grounding of research, its practical application, and the ethical underpinnings of working on donor-driven projects.

Continuing in the area of conflict-focused research, Naomi Levy and Pamina Firchow describe how they are developing a bottom-up meso-level barometer of peace with the Pasto Indigenous group in Nariño, Colombia. The project is an extension of the Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) methodology, a pioneering CM that demonstrates how highly localized, bottom-up measures of peace can be sourced by including local voices in the measurement of peace (Firchow and Mac Ginty 2020). The article discusses the complexity involved in scaling up locally sourced indicators for use across a wider geographic area, highlighting the need to balance the importance of particular peace indicators with their commonality across communities.

Building on the EPI model, Thomas Flores's article queries whether EPI's methodology of grassroots peace indicators can be extended to democracy. He contends that a heavy reliance on top-down, standardized definitions of democracy have meant that political scientists understand surprisingly little about how citizens define, experience, and make meaning of democracy and how those processes differ across time and space. Therefore, he advocates for the creation of an Everyday Democracy Index, which would bring the voices of local and everyday users of democracy into its conceptualization, measurement, and—ultimately—practice.

The final contribution to the symposium addresses how researchers might speak about their projects when they have been unable to enact CM. Han Dorussen, Zorzeta Bakaki, and Athena Kolbe discuss their large-N survey in Haiti, where CM was not a viable option for various reasons. Their article considers the potential value of participatory, bottom-up surveys to generate knowledge grounded in local understanding but which in contexts of political instability present serious challenges to the feasibility of CM.

A WAY FORWARD FOR COLLABORATIVE METHODOLOGIES IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

To conclude, it is clear that CM appears differently across a range of contexts and variables. However, certain criteria can allow for CM methods to be replicable. The binding commonalities of CM are to invite and involve people in "researched" communities to be active participants in research puzzle formation, to provide input for the tools used for measurement and analysis, and to acknowledge and address power inequities while doing so. Replicable CM methods exist, such as EPI; others are more adaptable to different contexts and needs. However, all CM methods require sincere inclusion—not only mere consultation—in the development of the questions and tools of the research project.

CM strives to treat participants in research as equally important as researchers. Therefore, it attempts to combine theoretical puzzles in political science with the real-life challenges of everyday people. CM recognizes the inherent power imbalances in social science research and is particularly concerned with colonial tendencies within political science. Therefore, CM is a lifelong commitment because, like anti-racist work, decolonization entails daily practice and does not have an endpoint. CM and methods offer the potential to further decolonize political science, and this symposium focusing on CM and methods presents several critical analyses describing how these efforts are playing out. This symposium could not come at a more appropriate time, when all political scientists should be thinking seriously about their positionality vis-à-vis the people, institutions, and systems that they study to ensure that their work is inclusive of the voices and viewpoints that traditionally have been excluded. ■

NOTE

1. A search for "participatory action research" in the *American Political Science Review* showed zero results, revealing how little political scientists have reflected on the use of collaboration with and inclusion of those they study in their research.

REFERENCES

Baum, Fran, Colin MacDougall, and Danielle Smith. 2006. "Participatory Action Research." *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 60 (10): 854–57. DOI:10.1136/jech.2004.028662

Bleck, Jaimie, Chipo Dendere, and Boukary Sangaré. 2018. "Making North–South Research Collaborations Work." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (3): 554–58.

Bracic, Ana. 2018. "For Better Science: The Benefits of Community Engagement in Research." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (3): 550–53.

Collier, David, and Steven Levitsky. 1997. "Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research." *World Politics* 49 (3): 430–51.

Cramer, Katherine. 2015. "Transparent Explanations, Yes. Public Transcripts and Fieldnotes, No. Ethnographic Research on Public Opinion." *Newsletter of the American Political Science Association, Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 13 (1): 17–20.

Fearon, James D., Macartan Humphreys, and Jeremy M. Weinstein. 2009. "Can Development Aid Contribute to Social Cohesion after Civil War? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Post-Conflict Liberia." *American Economic Review* 99 (2): 287–91.

Firchow, Pamina. 2018. *Reclaiming Everyday Peace: Local Voices in Measurement and Evaluation after War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Firchow, Pamina, and Roger Mac Ginty. 2020. "Including Hard-to-Access Populations Using Mobile Phone Surveys and Participatory Indicators." *Sociological Methods & Research* 49 (1): 133–60.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2012. "Research Ethics 101: Dilemmas and Responsibilities." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45 (4): 717–23. DOI:10.1017/S1049096512000819.

Gellman, Mneesha. 2017. *Democratization and Memories of Violence: Ethnic Minority Rights Movements in Mexico, Turkey, and El Salvador*. London and New York: Routledge.

Gellman, Mneesha. 2019. "The Right to Learn our (M)Other Tongues: Indigenous Languages and Neoliberal Citizenship in El Salvador and Mexico." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 40 (4): 523–37.

Gellman, Mneesha. Forthcoming. *Culture Kids: Indigenous Resistance and Language Survival in Mexico and the United States*. Book manuscript in process.

Gerring, John. 1999. "What Makes a Concept Good? A Criterial Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences." *Polity* 31 (S): 357.

Goertz, Gary. 2006. *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521000330 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kemmis, Stephen, Robin McTaggart, and Rhonda Nixon. 2014. *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research.* Singapore: Springer Science & Business Media.

MacLean, Lauren M., Elliot Posner, Susan Thomson, and Elisabeth Jean Wood. 2018. *Research Ethics and Human Subjects: A Reflexive Openness Approach.* https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3332887.

Michelitch, Kristin. 2018. "Whose Research Is It? Political Scientists Discuss Whether, How, and Why We Should Involve the Communities We Study." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (3): 543–45. DOI:10.1017/S1049096518000422.

Pachirat, Timothy. 2018. *Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power.* New York: Routledge.

Sartori, Giovani. 1970. "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics." *American Political Science Review* 64 (4): 1033–53.

Schaffer, Frederic Charles. 2016. *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide.* New York: Routledge.

Thachil, Tariq, and Milan Vaishnav. 2018. "The Strategic and Moral Imperatives of Local Engagement: Reflections on India." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51 (3): 546–49.

SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS

Gildfred B. Asiamah *is research analyst at the Center for Democratic Development–Ghana. His research interests include citizenship, participation, accountability in public service delivery, and state capacity. He can be contacted at g.asiamah@cddgh.org.*

Mohammed S. Awal *is senior research analyst and team leader at the Center for Democratic Development–Ghana. His research focuses on government transparency and accountability and citizen engagement. He can be contacted at m.awal@cddgh.org.*

Zorzeta Bakaki *is senior lecturer of government at the University of Essex. Her research interests are the qualitative and quantitative analysis of conflict management and resolution and environmental politics. She can be reached at zbakak@essex.ac.uk.*

Jennifer Cyr *is associate professor in the School of Government and Public Policy and the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona. Her research interests include political representation and democracy in Latin America as well as the study of qualitative and mixed methods. She can be reached at jmcyr@arizona.edu.*

Han Dorussen *is professor of government at the University of Essex. His research interests are in peacekeeping and the governance of post-conflict societies. He can be reached at hdorus@essex.ac.uk.*

Pamina Firchow *is associate professor at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University. Her research interests include the participation, inclusion, and collaboration of everyday people with international actors in the peacebuilding and transitional-justice sectors. She can be reached at pfirchow@brandeis.edu.*

Thomas Edward Flores *is associate professor and director of graduate programs at the Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. His research interests include the relationship between democratic practice and political violence and political leadership in economic development. He can be reached at tflores2@gmu.edu.*

Mneesha Gellman *is associate professor of political science at the Marlboro Institute for Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies at Emerson College. Her research interests include the politics of violence and resistance in democratizing contexts. She can be reached at mneesha_gellman@emerson.edu.*

Oliver Kaplan *is associate professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. His research interests include civilian nonviolent protection during armed conflicts, the reintegration of ex-combatants, and post-conflict peacebuilding approaches. He can be reached at Oliver.Kaplan@du.edu.*

Athena R. Kolbe *is assistant professor of social work at the College of Health and Human Services at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. Her research interests are human rights, needs assessment, and international social work, with a particular focus on Haiti. She can be reached at kolbea@uncw.edu.*

Naomi Levy *is associate professor of political science at Santa Clara University. Her research centers on the relationships between ordinary citizens and the state, with a particular focus on post-conflict contexts. She can be reached at nlevy@scu.edu.*

Lauren M. MacLean *is Arthur F. Bentley Chair and professor of political science at Indiana University–Bloomington. Her research focuses on the politics of public service provision and everyday citizenship. She can be contacted at macleanl@indiana.edu.*

Drew Mikhael *is senior research fellow in the Centre for the Study of Ethnic Conflict at Queen's University Belfast. His research interests include ethnic politics, conflict management, refugees, and participatory methods. He can be reached at a.mikhael@qub.ac.uk.*

Julie Norman *is lecturer of political science at University College London. Her research interests include conflict, security, and resistance, and she has published widely on community-based approaches to preventing violence. She can be reached at julie.norman@ucl.ac.uk.*

Susan Thomson *is associate professor of peace and conflict studies at Colgate University. Her research interests are state–society relations and qualitative research methodologies in post-conflict Africa, with an emphasis on Kenya and Rwanda. She can be reached at sthomson@colgate.edu.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521000330 Published online by Cambridge University Press