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Political Training in Four Generations of Activists in Argentina and Brazil

Transparency criteria and replicability

At the request of the Editors of the Brazilian Political Science Review (BPSR), I provide here a detailed description of some of Aguinis and Solarino's (2019) 'transparency criteria' (I was asked to detail at least two) as I apply them for my own research. Once I have finished this task, I will also discuss some of the postulates of Aguinis and Solarino's article (2019). The intention is to express and substantiate certain concerns regarding their proposition of widespread use of their transparency criteria list, as well as their expectation of 'replicability' by editors and reviewers evaluating qualitative research articles in social sciences journals (especially in political science journals).

First, I find important to point out the following: if, on the one hand, I value transparency in academic research – and a good initiative from journals would be to encourage authors to send a separate file with "supporting information" with a description of different aspects of the research design, fieldwork, and analysis, with a more flexible word limit – on the other, I disagree with the idea that replication is a desirable goal when it comes to qualitative research. I will return to this matter later.

Second, my article "Political Training in Four Generations of Activists in Argentina and Brazil", to be published in the BPSR, is only a small part of a broader research project on the transformations in political linkage in both countries through the study of activists' political engagement in organizations that actively supported the Kirchner (2003-2015) and the Workers' Party (2003-2016) administrations. So, most of the aspects that I will describe here are rather associated with my broader research project than with this particular and more recent article, which resulted from the analysis of one single aspect of activism

(training) and used a smaller sample with a selection of interviewees divided into four generations. Aguinis and Solarino refer to a similar case when they say that their transparency criteria

> should not be applied rigidly to all qualitative research. The reason is that, although they are broad in nature, not all of them apply to every situation and type of qualitative study. For example, a manuscript may describe a qualitative study that is only a small portion of a larger effort (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019: 1311).

With the two above-mentioned specifications in mind, I have chosen the following six "transparency criteria" out of the 12 formulated by Aguinis and Solarino (2019). In the following pages, I mention the specific criteria and also quote Aguinis and Solarino's consideration of when such criteria are met (according to their table on page 1299):

Criterion #1: "Kind of qualitative method"

"The authors clearly identify the type of qualitative research approach they adopted"

I will describe here only aspects of my qualitative approach that were not mentioned in the BPSR article itself (in its section "methodological decisions" and the appendix). It is also important to clarify some issues.

First of all, unlike the articles analyzed by Aguinis and Solarino, my research's main methodological technique did not consist of interviews with "elite informants" (IEIs). In the course of my broader research project (of which the BPSR article is only a part), a few of the subjects (Baltasar, Leonele, and Enrique, in Brazil, and Javier in Argentina – all fictional names), could be considered "key informants", which is not equivalent, in qualitative research, to EIs.[1] In other words, they had considerable and useful knowledge and provided me with important insights on the

[1]Here I draw on Rosana Guber's definition of *"informante central"* ("key informant", in English), that is, a person seen as a fundamental source of information about a wide range of significant issues related to their own culture or social unit. This informant represents privileged and qualified access to the culture we are studying (Guber, 2004: 86).

Workers' Party (PT) and the Peronist Party (PJ) in addition to facilitating my access to the field and to other subjects. I also had "informal conversations" with other key informants (journalists, academics, etc.). However, my research sample for the BPSR article was rather composed of political activists (grassroots activists, organization leaders, public officials that are politically committed, national and local lawmakers, etc.); in short, subjects who were not EIs. I will return to the issue of sampling in criterion #4.

Second, I wanted to approach the subjects' narratives and interpretations following two main features of the **interpretive paradigm** I adopted within qualitative research: 1) an interest in meaning and interpretation, with an emphasis on the importance of context and processes, coupled with an inductive and hermeneutic strategy (Maxwell, 2004); and 2) the double hermeneutic theory (Giddens, 1976) present in the interpretive paradigm, in which the researcher interprets something that has already been interpreted by the subjects themselves, thus creating second-order concepts. As researchers, we reinterpret a situation that is meaningful (in other words, that makes sense) to those who participate in it (Bryman, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), and we clearly commit to looking at events, actions, norms, and values from the perspective and frames of meaning of the subjects being examined. The **ontological perspective** underpinning the interpretive paradigm (in other words, how it conceives the nature of reality) is one in which reality is perceived as socially constructed and relative. Now, if reality is a social construction, then there are several realities: at least the realities of the actor (or actors), the observer, and the eventual reader of the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The **methodological perspective** of the interpretive paradigm involves inductive mechanisms and a focus on the particular characteristics of what we seek to understand, thus resulting in an in-depth analysis of the case. As a qualitative researcher, I did "not seek laws but meanings; the importance of these kinds of findings lies in their specificity and circumstantial character" (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 1992: 60, my translation). In terms of results, the interpretative paradigm assumes the impossibility to generalize and predict.

Theories are not verified or falsified by the facts but appear as a result of understanding those facts. Thus, while quantitative research is associated with the accumulation of knowledge for purposes of control and prediction, qualitative research aims to understand the meaning of social action in specific contexts (Bryman, 2000; Meo and Navarro, 2009).

I would like to clarify a third issue: **different traditions had some bearing on the research.** For example, even though this study is not a grounded theory study, the fieldwork and data analysis were influenced by **grounded theory**'s notion of a reciprocal relationship between data gathering, analysis, and theory; unforeseen elements can be crucial, and concepts not necessarily pre-exist the empirical analysis but result of induction (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Glaser, 1992). Also, although my broader research project included participant observation –not analyzed specifically for the BPSR article, but for others (Rocca Rivarola, 2017a and 2018)– it was not strictly an ethnography. For instance, my fieldwork did not involve daily observations of the activists' routines over a long period of time, but rather observations on specific occasions such as political rallies, open meetings, and gatherings of activists; these kinds of observations provide a different kind of empirical data. However, my fieldwork was inspired by the **ethnographic approach** and followed some of its techniques and criteria. In that sense, Schatz's (2009) concept of "**ethnographic sensitivity**" for political studies was quite useful, especially for raising attention to the importance of gathering and taking into consideration the meanings that subjects give to their own political and social reality, as I previously mentioned.

Criterion #3: "Position of researcher along the insider-outsider continuum"

"The authors clearly position themselves on the insider-outsider continuum"

I was clearly seen as an outsider by all the organizations and subjects I had access to in both countries (Argentina and Brazil). I had not been a member of any of those organizations in the past, and I did not have a personal relationship with

any of the subjects. Of course, in some cases, some of the key informants I mentioned earlier in this description (whom I met in the course of the fieldwork) provided me with phone numbers of acquaintances, comrades, and *compañeros*/*companheiros* (fellow activists). These key informants not only facilitated my access to the field but most likely inspired more confidence and openness from interviewees since I was contacting them through a person they already knew.

As a qualitative researcher (and now I move beyond Aguinis and Solarino's criterion #3), I acknowledge the **notion of reflexivity** of the interpretive paradigm, from which the researcher acknowledges that his or her values and multiple identities have an impact on the research process. Reflexivity involves examining the researcher's "self" and inquiring about how his or her participation affects the production and analysis of data (Reay 1996; Meo and Navarro, 2009). In other words, what subjects did and did not disclose and how they felt when speaking to me must have been affected in some way by my identities and what they saw in me (woman, Caucasian, Ph.D. student and then Ph.D. holder, short, in her late 20s and then early 30s, Argentine, etc.). This is a key issue because, if we consider reflexivity an important aspect of qualitative research, then the requirement or even desirability of exact replication of our research by others[2] is contradictory.

After I finished my fieldwork, I kept in touch with a few subjects, especially from Brazil (through e-mail, social networks, and personal visits). I have also sent them (and others) my articles and even a book that I have recently published with research results.

Criterion #4: "Sampling procedures"

"The authors describe the kind of variability they seek and how they identified the participants or cases"

[2]Aguinis and Solarino (2019) define three types of replication. "Exact replication" is the replication (by another researcher) of a previous study "using the same population and the same procedures". In "empirical replication", on the other hand, a previous study is replicated using the same procedures but a different population. And, finally, in a "conceptual replication", a previous study is replicated using the same population but different procedures.

As I mention in the BPSR article, I interviewed activists from different kinds of political organizations that actively supported both the Kirchner and PT administrations during either all their time in government or just part of it. For my broader research project, I conducted 129 interviews in Argentina and Brazil, 74 of which were conducted between 2005 and 2010 (time period of the research for my doctoral thesis on these organizations, their links to the government, their identities, their interaction with similar organizations and their internal dynamics), and 55 between 2013 and 2015 (time period of the post-doc research on the transformations in political linkage). For the BPSR article, I selected a sample of interviews with 43 of these activists. With some of these activists, I conducted two interviews, and, on two occasions, two subjects were interviewed together (Leonele and Enrique, from Brazil; and Emilio and Santino, from Argentina). Attached to this description are the recordings of the interviews for the BPSR editors to consult. The sample is mostly composed of interviews conducted between 2013 and 2015, while a few were recovered from the doctoral research sample (interviews conducted between 2005 and 2010).

The case selection (Argentina and Brazil during both the PT and the Kirchner administrations) and the decision on where to carry out the fieldwork (cities/geographical areas) remained the same throughout fieldwork (2005-2015) and is already justified in the article approved by the BPSR.

The general sampling procedure was "**snowball sampling**", aimed at building a "**purposeful sample**" (Patton, 2002), that is, one with valuable "**information-rich cases**", to achieve a deep understanding rather than a general theory (Flick, 2004). With this sampling procedure, thus, the definition of the sample (who, how many, etc.) is gradual and open throughout the research process (Meo and Navarro, 2009).

As for the kind of **variability** I sought when building a smaller sample for the BPSR article on activist training, I used the following criteria:

a) Regarding the organizations, of all the organizations that actively supported the government, I wanted those with some political relevance or public

importance to be included. In Argentina, the sample included a wider range of organizations because I decided to take into consideration the numerous Kirchnerist collectives that were proliferating beyond and outside the PJ. In Brazil, conversely, since the presence of PT members in non-partisan organizations was quite significant, the concern was to represent in the sample different PT factions and factional groupings, as well as other allied parties and organizations.

b) I also wanted to gather a similar number of interviewees in both countries, as well as interviewees from different generational groups, which were not defined by age as much as by the period in time or decade in which they had begun their political engagement. It is important to clarify that the original and wider sample was not built with the purpose of selecting different generational groups.

c) I also sought to reduce, for the BPSR article's sample, the gender asymmetry that had defined my broader research's sample. It is worth mentioning here that in my fieldwork in both countries I experienced an unexpected challenge: limited access to female activists. In some cases, men were more willing to be interviewed; in others, women whom I approached to set an interview date in the near future referred me to a male activist (usually with more responsibility in the organization). As I considered the gender asymmetry of the wider sample and the unexpected challenge of accessing women in the fieldwork, I decided to include a higher proportion of women to reduce gender asymmetry for the sample of the BPSR article. Yet, the asymmetry remains significant (32 men and 11 women).

d) I also sought variability in activists' permanence in and fluctuation between organizations, ensuring the sample contained two categories of activists: those that had been part of only one organization their whole lives and those who had belonged to and oscillated between different groups or organizations (see table "Some quantitative data regarding the sample", in the BPSR article's appendix). I also wanted the sample to include subjects

with positions of authority (whether formal or not, nationally or locally) as well as grassroots activists. Of the total sample (43 subjects), 55% were activists without a formal leading position in their respective organizations.

Criterion #6: "Documenting interactions with participants"

"The authors describe how each interaction was documented and the associated content"

Although I will not present a description of my interactions with each of the 43 subjects, it is possible to outline, in general terms, how I contacted them and how I documented the different interactions (setting the interview and the interview itself).

My first access to most of the subjects was by e-mail, which I got from googling their addresses, from their organization's institutional mail, from other researchers, etc. I would then present myself, my institutional affiliation (the UBA – University of Buenos Aires, the Gino Germani Research Institute, the CONICET – National Scientific and Technical Research Council, in Argentina, which granted me a fellowship, etc.), my research topic and then ask them if I could interview them in person. After some e-mail exchange, if I felt they were still reluctant, I would also send them links to some of my published articles or Congress papers. In other cases, I directly called the subjects whose phone numbers I had got from institutions, colleagues, or others.

Last but certainly not least, participant observation was key to getting new contacts and gaining more access. During the observation of political rallies and meetings, I managed to get many phone numbers from the subjects themselves (or from fellow activists): I would approach someone on these occasions and tell them about my research, asking for a contact number to later call them and set a date for an interview.

Activist training was not a central topic of the interview guides of my broader research project (which changed throughout the years), but the topic

emerged somehow as a result of questions related to activism now and in the past. The guides covered topics such as the activists' experience, their participation in an organization aligned with the government, and their relationship with the administration and the president. Specific processes and historical facts of the period were also addressed to elicit a description from the subjects of how they had personally experienced them. **Activist training emerged as a significant topic in many interviews,** and that was, in great part, what motivated me to analyze activist training in 2018 for the BPSR article and define a selection of interviews (among the total of 129) to build a new, smaller sample.

The interviews were conducted in **the subjects' languages** (in Argentina, in Spanish; in Brazil, in Portuguese). The transcriptions also kept the original language and were done either by me or by others (in the last case, I would later read and correct them while listening to the recordings). Translation either to English, Spanish, or Portuguese only took place at the writing stage and focused on the specific fragment that would be quoted in papers written in one of those languages. As for the implications of translating in qualitative research and the contextualization premise, Temple y Edwards (2002) have pointed out the difficulties faced by translators when having to choose between different possible combinations of words to provide meaning to a narrative (Temple y Edwards, 2002: 2). I did all the translating myself.

Over the years, as I gained proficiency in Portuguese, my interactions with the subjects improved, allowing me, for example, to spontaneously ask some supplementary questions and address additional topics during the interviews. This gains in fluency is another reason why, when selecting the new, smaller sample for the BPSR article on training, I prioritized the interviews conducted between 2013 and 2015 over the ones conducted, for example, during my first fieldwork trip to São Paulo in 2008.

Before an interview, I would always look for online information on the subject, taking notes about their public lives and their participation in important events. This previous brief research often proved useful during the conversations,

as subjects were more eager to engage in a conversation with someone who had some knowledge on issues they were interested in or on events they had experienced.

I did not film or photograph the subjects I interviewed. I only took pictures during participant observation of political rallies and other political activities (in smaller meetings, I only took notes). I never took pictures during, before, or after the interviews because I wanted the conversations to be fluid and the subjects to feel comfortable. I recorded each interview (with the interviewees' previous consent) and, now and then, while listening, I would write down a short sentence or word in my field notebook to remind myself of a question or topic I would like to bring up later.

As an icebreaker, **the first question** was always a general one about the moment the interviewee had engaged in politics. During the interviews, I developed the "active" and "floating" listening and followed some tactics proposed by different authors (Denscombe, 1999; Patton, 2002; Guber, 2004; Meo and Navarro, 2009), such as moments of intentional silence and ways to animate or elicit a (re)elaboration by the interviewees. All of this was mastered in the course of the interviewing process (Kvale, 1996).

After leaving the interview site, I would often write a short **post-interview memo** (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 2002), with a "thick description"[3] of the situation (before, during, and after the conversation), as well as anything else that seemed relevant during the interview but had not been captured by the recording. Sometimes, if something especially important or interesting had emerged in the conversation, I would write an **"analytical memo"** with ideas, potential new codes or patterns, and even questions.

[3]In their article, Aguinis and Solarino (2019) say that they "see the 12 transparency criteria as an extension to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as 'thick description' in qualitative research". For me, the notion of thick description in qualitative research is, instead, evocative of Geertz's (1973) concept of thick description, which involves, in ethnography, describing human conduct by explaining not only the behaviour itself but also its context, so that the meaning given by the subject can be understood by an outsider.

There are certain **ethical considerations** in the qualitative research paradigm (Warwick, 1982; Denscombe, 1999; Meo, 2010) that were **considered when conducting the interviews and documenting the interactions.** Despite dealing with subjects who were involved in politics and sometimes in the public sphere – who, therefore, were often familiar, to some extent, with the dynamics of interviewing, I would always give the interviewees an explicit description of the interview's dynamics from the start as well as information about the nature of the investigation, so that **informed consent** could be obtained. Furthermore, I used **pseudonyms or fictional names** to protect the interviewees from any harm that could come from publicizing their names with their accounts. With this decision, I prioritized their accounts over their real identities, even though in some cases their identities were themselves an important piece of information (in the case of a political leader, for example). Later, I will return to the issue of research confidentiality, which is key in qualitative research and not sufficiently addressed by Aguinis and Solarino (2019) in their list of transparency criteria (see below, under the description for criterion #12, "Data disclosure").

Criterion #10: "Data coding and first-order codes"

"The authors describe the first- order coding methodology and present the full code list"

Following the tradition of grounded theory, the analysis and interpretation of data (for my broader research project) began during fieldwork, not after it (Mendizábal, 2006), in an uninterrupted and recurrent "zig-zag" sequence (Creswell, 1998). **However, since I have built, for the BPSR article, a new, smaller sample from a selection of already completed interviews with subjects of different generational groups, the analysis, in this case, was done years after the fieldwork had finished, more precisely, between 2018 and 2019.**

I am attaching to this description the code list (in Spanish) that was used during my broader research project. I highlighted in yellow the codes that I paid special attention to when revisiting the interviewees' accounts for the BPSR article.

For this particular article, the analysis was not done with the use of software but manually, by taking notes and analyzing previous output (specifically looking for references to activist training). Pictures of some of these handwritten notes are in the database. This kind of manual and handwritten analysis was possible, in this case, because the sample was smaller, the article's topic was quite circumscribed, and some of the findings, such as those related to nostalgia or activism and State immersion, had undergone a preliminary analysis for other papers (Rocca Rivarola, 2017b and 2019).

The first-order coding (for my broader research project) combined "**open coding**" and "***in vivo* coding**". For instance, the term *professionalização da militância* (in English, activist professionalization), which refers to full-time activism with a salary (through a job in the State, for example) emerged as a common category among Brazilian interviewees. This term eventually became one of the *in vivo* codes, which was then related to Ribeiro's (2010) study on the PT. **The code list includes descriptive categories, categories of a more conceptual nature (or of a higher level of abstraction) and sub-dimensions of certain categories.** For the analysis process, I drew on several studies on coding and qualitative analysis of interviews (Dey, 1993; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1994; Coffey and Atkinson, 2003; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 2002). For Strauss and Corbin (2002), for example, coding is considered a process that enables not only assigning tags to data, but also conceptualizing, asking questions, and providing tentative answers about the potential relationships between newly created categories (Strauss and Corbin, 2002).

As I revisited the interviews (in a specific order, so as to more easily identify and remember regularities or patterns within each generation of interviewees) I took "output" notes following the previously elaborated codes (notes on the interviewees' references to a particular issue related to one or more

codes/categories), and I also registered how the issue of activist training emerged in the subjects' narratives. Then, I built **comparative matrices** with findings for the four generational groups of the sample in both countries. I am attaching the scanned image of one of these matrices.

Criterion #12: "Data disclosure"

"The authors disclose the raw materials gathered and examined during study"

I am attaching, in a compressed file, all the interviews' recordings and transcriptions so that the editors of the BPSR can see, check, and evaluate. However, I strongly disagree with Aguinis and Solarino's (2019) idea that disclosing these materials is the only and best way to meet this "transparency" criterion. Furthermore, **I cannot authorize the BPSR to make these materials public.** The reason is simple: anonymity and confidentiality are part of a consolidated ethical principle in qualitative research (Grinyer, 2002). I believe that seeking transparency in qualitative research should not put these ethical considerations at risk. The dilemma and problems for anonymity and confidentiality created by recent transparency-related requirements (such as disclosing recordings and transcriptions) have been detected and analyzed, for example, by Monroe (2018). Having respected these ethical considerations over all these years (for example, using fictional names for the interviewees, concealing supplementary personal data, and refraining from using parts of the interviewees' accounts that they had specifically asked me not to quote), I do not intend to radically change them in order to convey methodological rigor and transparency. Thus, **I am requesting the BPSR to dispose of all the recordings and transcriptions after the editors have checked them and ensured the survey's transparency.**

Having presented the detailed description of six of Aguinis and Solarino's 12 "transparency/replicability criteria", I would like, at this point, to briefly discuss some of the authors' postulates.

Aguinis and Solarino (2019: 1292) themselves acknowledge that the desirability of replicability is "a potentially contentious issue in qualitative research". Indeed, although there are numerous methodological handbooks and articles on rigor and even on transparency in qualitative research, that is not the case with replication (see Kincheloe and Berry, 2004, for example). Replication is, rather, a concept that the authors have transplanted from other methodological perspectives. This procedure would not be in itself problematic if the qualitative perspective could, as a result, be enriched with new terms and discussions. But one of the main conclusions of Aguinis and Solarino's work is that **none** of the 52 articles they analyzed (all published in the same academic journal, after undergoing a thorough double-blind peer-review) were sufficiently transparent. None of them met their expectations or their transparency criteria. And they go further, suggesting (inductively?) that this could be generalized to other journals. The underlying argument (see Aguinis and Solarino, 2019, p. 1305), therefore, is that qualitative research is not replicable and, thus, not transparent enough (as opposed to quantitative research).

I share the concerns raised by one of the anonymous reviewers of Aguinis and Solarino's article, who, as the authors say, pointed out that widespread use of this criteria list by editors and reviewers of social sciences journals would have serious implications for qualitative studies, possibly leading to increased rejection to publishing such studies. Publishing qualitative research articles would be even more challenging in political science journals, given that quantitative studies are still predominant in that field, as many authors have argued (Sartori, 2004; Munck, 2007; Soares, 2008).

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