

Do Ethics Matter?
Documenting References to Ethics in Published Comparative Politics & International Relations
Research

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Background and Motivation

Researchers in comparative politics and international relations frequently employ data collection methods that involve interaction with human subjects, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, and field experiments, inter alia. Because of the very real potential for physical, social, and/or psychological harm to participants, collaborators, and others, all such research raises ethical issues relating to the treatment and protection of human subjects (Fujii 2012).

Following this observation, recent work has called on scholars to foreground ethical issues at all stages of the research process, from design to publication, and to move beyond narrowly “procedural” concepts of ethics that, for instance, focus solely on obtaining Institutional Review Board approval (Campbell 2017, Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018, Kaplan et al. 2020). However, whether researchers, editors, and reviewers treat ethics as if they matter is a separate, empirical question. This project examines this question by documenting and describing references to research ethics pertaining to the treatment of human subjects in five prominent Political Science and International Relations journals from 2014-2021.

Methodology

We developed a novel dataset of the treatment of ethics in published political science articles. To develop the dataset we reviewed articles published from 2014-2021, inclusive, in the *American Political Science Review* (comparative politics and international relations articles only), *Comparative Political Studies* (all articles), *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (all articles), *International Security* (all articles), and *World Politics* (all articles). These journals were purposively selected based on impact factor in Political Science and International Relations and because each regularly publishes articles involving human subjects research.

We hand-coded each article according to the following sequence of questions to document and describe references to ethics. Reviewing the articles ourselves and with our team of research assistants allowed us to capture the broadest possible set of articles in which we would both expect to see a discussion of research ethics, and whether there was any evidence in the final published work of the ethical considerations that went into the project.

1) Does the article involve human subjects research?

While ethical considerations are relevant in all research, we are particularly interested in ethical issues pertaining to the treatment and protection of human subjects. Accordingly, we first identified the sub-set of articles in each journal that involved human subjects research. We specifically focused on articles where the author(s) were involved in collecting original data through interaction with human subjects. To this end, we conducted a text search of articles for the following terms (and relevant variations) in the context of discussions of research design and methodology: *ethnography, interview, survey, questionnaire, focus group, crowd, experiment, online, participant, human, subject*. Our analysis includes only articles that included one or more of these terms in context relevant to human subjects research.

2) Does the article discuss research ethics?

We reviewed each article involving human subjects research to determine if there were any references to research ethics. To this end, we conducted a text search of the main article and any online appendices using two categories of search terms.

The first category comprised terms (and relevant variations) directly relating to ethical issues in human subjects research, as follows: *anonymous, confidential, consent, ethics, human, privacy, deception, deceit, safety, security*.

The second category comprised terms (and relevant variations) associated with institutional bodies involved in the review, approval, and regulation of human subjects research, as follows: *Institutional Review Board, IRB, board, committee, panel, research compliance, protocol*.

As above, we only coded articles as discussing research ethics if the above terms were used in a context relevant to human subjects research.

3) How does the article address research ethics?

We next coded each article that discussed research ethics on a series of variables pertaining to the *quality* of the discussion, as follows:

Placement: We recorded if the discussion of ethics was presented in the *main text, footnote or endnote, appendix, or multiple locations*.

Length: We coded if the discussion of ethics comprised a *clause, sentence, multiple sentences, paragraph, multiple paragraphs, entire section, and several pages/entire article*.

IRB Approval: We recorded if the article reported authorization by an IRB or other ethics review body.

Descriptive Data and Findings

In total, we reviewed 1,833 empirical research articles published in the *American Political Science Review, Comparative Political Studies, International Security, Journal of Conflict Resolution, and World Politics* from 2014-2021; of these, 549 (29.95%) involved human subjects research where we might expect discussions of ethics. Human subjects research was most frequently published in *World Politics* (42.55%), followed by *International Security* (39.10%), *Comparative Political Studies* (33.90%), *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (25.23%), and the *American Political Science Review* (24.11%).

We find a relatively low instance of discussion of ethics in published research involving human subjects across these journals. Of the 549 articles involving human subjects research in our sample, 172 (31.33%) included at least one reference to research ethics. The figures below illustrate key descriptive patterns in these references, focusing on three dimensions of variation: journal, time, and quality of references.

Figure 1 depicts variation in references to ethics by journal; this figure illustrates the percentage of articles involving original human subjects research that included ANY reference to research ethics in each of the five journals we reviewed. As illustrated in this figure, the proportion of articles involving human subjects research that referenced ethics did not exceed 50% for any of

the five journals; values ranged from 25.37% for the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* to 45.22% for the *American Political Science Review*.

Figure 1: Articles Involving Human Subjects Research Referencing Research Ethics, by Journal (Percentage)

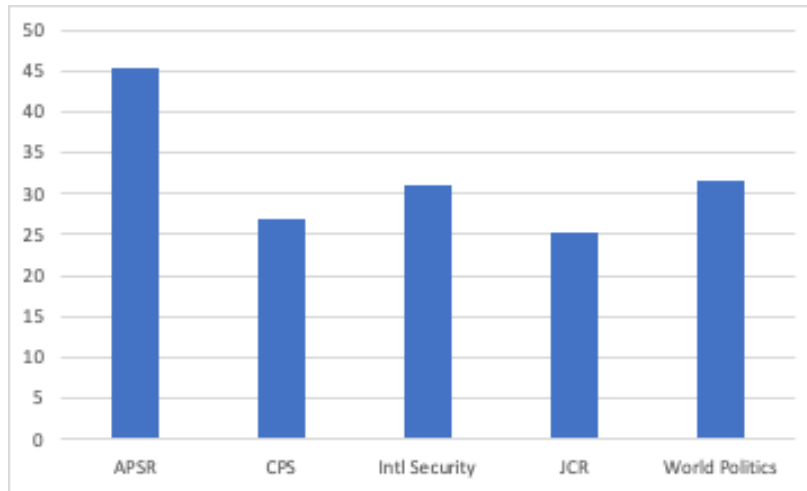
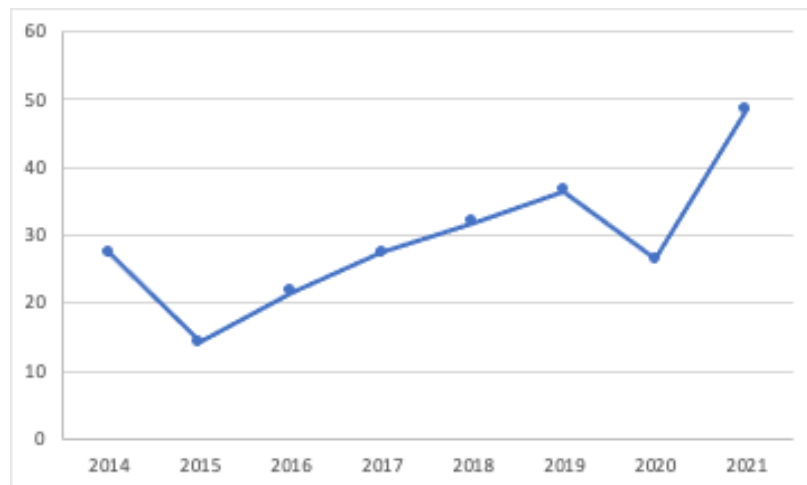


Figure 2 depicts variation in ethics references over time; as in Figure 1, this figure illustrates the percentage of articles involving original human subjects research that included ANY reference to research ethics across all five of the journals we reviewed. The annual values range from 14.29% in 2015 to 48.50% in 2021, and the figure illustrates an overall tendency toward increased ethics references over time—albeit not entirely linear, with decreased references from 2014 to 2015 and 2019 to 2020 before increasing in subsequent years.

Figure 2: Articles Involving Human Subjects Research Referencing Ethics, over Time (Percentage)



Figures 3 and 4 depict variation in *how* researchers use ethics; as such, the percentages in these figures are calculated using the sub-set of articles with any ethics reference as the denominator. Figure 3 illustrates variation in the placement of references to ethics; as illustrated in this figure, footnotes and endnote are the most frequent location for ethics references (37.21% of all articles referencing ethics), followed by the main text (29.65%), multiple locations (23.26%), and appendix only (9.88%).

Figure 3: Placement of Articles Referencing Ethics (Percentage)

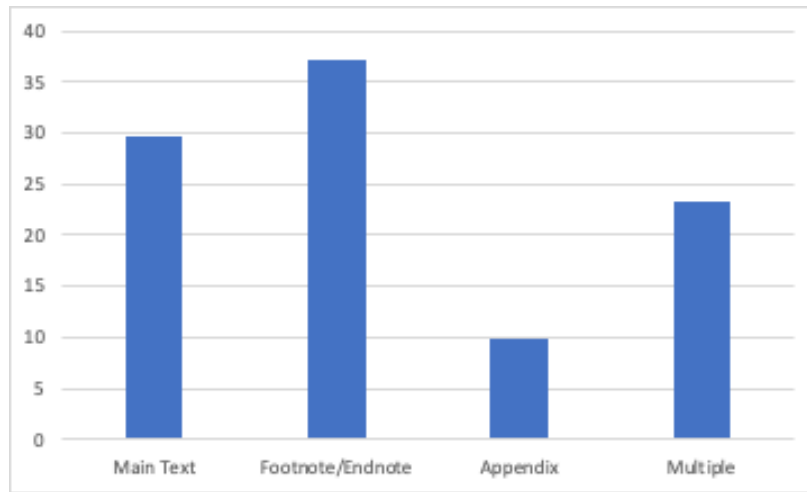
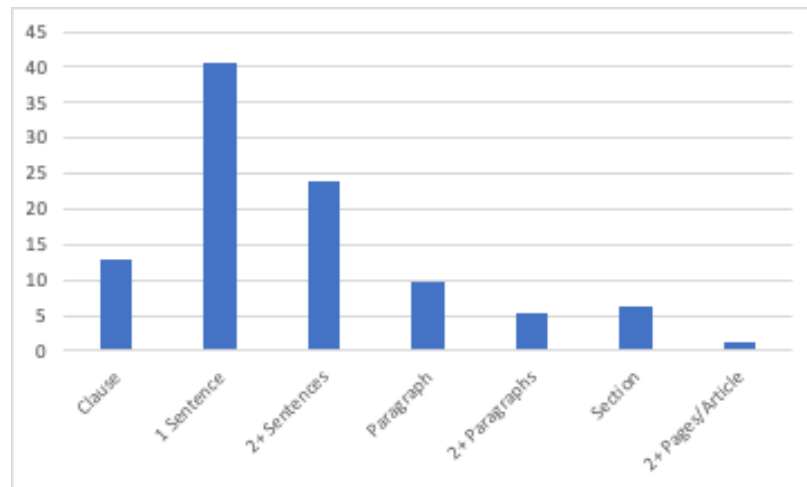


Figure 4: Length of Articles Referencing Ethics (Percentage)

Figure 4 illustrates variation in the length of references to ethics; as illustrated in this figure, the modal length of ethics references is a single sentence (40.70% of articles referencing ethics). The next most common length is two sentences (23.84%), followed by a sub-clause within a sentence (12.79%), single paragraph (9.89%), entire section (6.4%), two or more paragraphs within a single section (5.23%), and two or more pages/entire article (1.16%).



Finally, we also collected data on whether articles with references to ethics noted IRB approval; of the 172 articles with ethics references that we examined, 103 (59.88%) reported IRB approval.

Conclusions and Next Steps

In this note, we have presented descriptive data on references to research ethics in published articles involving human subjects research in five prominent political science and international relations journals from 2014-2021. While we find a generally low level of engagement with ethical issues, with less than 30% of articles involving human subjects research including any reference to ethics, we also note important variation across journals, time, and in the length and placement of references to ethics. While most of the data presented in this note are aggregated across journals, we plan to dig deeper to identify more disaggregated patterns and trends (e.g. trends in ethics references over time by journal, placement of ethics references over time, etc.) Additionally, we also plan to examine possible explanations for the variation in ethics references described in this paper, focusing both on disciplinary incentives and constraints (e.g. journal ethics policies, word counts, etc.) and individual-level researcher characteristics (e.g. career stage, institution type, gender, etc.).

References

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