Supporting Reproducibility and Transparency in Qualitative Research

POLICY BRIEF FOR SCIENCE POLICYMAKERS

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INTRODUCTION

Across Europe and globally, concerns about the credibility of scientific research have led to policy efforts to promote reproducibility, transparency, and Open Science. These efforts are visible in EU initiatives such as Horizon Europe, Open Research Europe, and policies promoting open data, preregistration, and transparent reporting. While these reforms have largely been designed with quantitative research in mind, they are increasingly applied to all forms of research, including qualitative research in the social sciences, health, and education.

Qualitative research plays a crucial role in EU policy-relevant knowledge. It helps policymakers understand social experiences, institutional practices, cultural contexts, and the real-world impacts of policies. Interviews, ethnography, case studies, and participatory research provide insights that numbers alone cannot. Ensuring trust in this type of research is therefore essential.

This policy brief draws on a large integrative review by Cole et al. (2024)[1], which examined 248 academic sources from across disciplines. The review shows that while reproducibility is often discussed as a universal goal, the way it is defined and enforced can unintentionally create barriers and penalties for qualitative researchers. At the same time, the study identifies many existing practices within qualitative research that already embody forms of openness, such as reflexivity, positionality, and detailed methodological documentation. To varying degrees, these established practices align with Open Science principles and support transparency and accountability, while also offering practical pathways for strengthening these principles.

The brief highlights key barriers and enablers of reproducibility in qualitative research and offers concrete recommendations for EU science policymakers, research funders, publishers, and institutions, while situating these issues in a broader global context.

BARRIERS TO REPRODUCIBILITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

1. ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL DEFINITIONS OF REPRODUCIBILITY

A major barrier identified by Cole et al. (2024) is that reproducibility is often defined using assumptions drawn from quantitative research. In these traditions, reproducibility often means that another researcher can repeat a study in the same way and obtain the same results.

Qualitative research works differently. It often explores meanings, experiences, and social processes that are shaped by time, place, and relationships. Expecting the same results from a repeated qualitative study is often unrealistic and, in many cases, inappropriate, given that reproducibility is not an aim of the research. When policies assume that reproducibility always means repeating a study to get the same findings, qualitative research is placed at a disadvantage.

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[1] This policy brief was drafted with the aid of ChatGPT.

2. CONTEXT AND RESEARCHER INVOLVEMENT

Qualitative findings are closely tied to context. Social settings change, participants' perspectives evolve, and researchers themselves play an active role in shaping the research process, data, and outcomes. Cole et al. (2024) show that many scholars see this as a core strength of qualitative research, but it becomes a barrier when reproducibility is understood as sameness.

Because qualitative researchers are deeply involved in data collection and interpretation, their background, values, and relationships with participants matter. This makes exact replication impossible in many cases, yet current science policy frameworks often fail to recognise this.

3. ETHICAL AND LEGAL CONSTRAINTS ON DATA SHARING

EU and global Open Science policies strongly promote data sharing. However, the review finds that ethical and legal concerns are among the most frequently cited challenges to the sharing and reuse of qualitative data. They often involve sensitive personal information, detailed life stories, or observations of small communities.

Even with anonymisation, it may be possible to identify participants indirectly. Informed consent agreements may also limit future data sharing, especially when participants did not agree to broad reuse of their data. These challenges are particularly acute under EU data protection frameworks such as the GDPR, but similar issues arise worldwide.

4. PRACTICAL BURDENS AND LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Preparing qualitative data for sharing is time-consuming and resource intensive. It requires careful anonymisation, detailed documentation, and ongoing ethical oversight. Cole et al. (2024) note that many repositories, templates, and data management systems are designed for quantitative data and do not fit the needs of qualitative research.

Without dedicated funding, training, and appropriate infrastructure, requirements for transparency can become a strenuous unfunded mandate, especially for early-career researchers and those working in under-resourced institutions.

ENABLERS OF REPRODUCIBILITY AND TRANSPARENCY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

1. EXISTING TRADITIONS OF DOCUMENTATION AND REFLEXIVITY

The review highlights that qualitative research already has strong traditions that support transparency (if not reproducibility). Researchers routinely document their methods, describe research settings in detail, and reflect upon their own role in shaping the research. Practices such as reflexivity, positionality statements, thick description, and detailed methodological documentation constitute alternative forms of openness that emphasise interpretive accountability and contextual transparency. These practices help readers understand how findings were produced, even if the study cannot be repeated exactly.

However, these forms of openness are not always fully compatible with dominant Open Science standards that stem from quantitative research traditions. As a result, they may remain unrecognised within standardised science policy frameworks and norms of funders and publishers. In some cases, prevailing interpretations of Open Science requirements risk obscuring or even disadvantaging qualitative approaches, even though they are open in ways that differ from data-centric models of transparency. Such practices support what many scholars describe as "understandability" or "traceability" rather than strict replication. Policymakers can build on these strengths rather than replacing them with ill-fitting Open Science standards.

2. FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTED APPROACHES TO OPENNESS

Cole et al.(2024) find growing support for adapting Open Science practices to qualitative research. Examples include controlled access to data, sharing excerpts instead of full datasets, and providing rich methodological descriptions when data cannot be shared.

These approaches balance transparency with ethical responsibility and are increasingly supported by specialised qualitative data repositories and guidance initiatives across Europe and beyond.

3. ETHICAL DATA GOVERNANCE AND CONSENT PRACTICES

Adapted consent procedures that address potential data reuse from the start of a project can enable greater transparency later. Ongoing engagement with participants, clear communication about data use, and ethical access controls are key enablers identified in the review.

Such practices align well with EU values around research integrity, participant protection, and responsible research and innovation.

4. TRAINING, GUIDANCE, AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Where researchers receive clear guidance and training tailored to qualitative methods, and where qualitative research communities are actively involved in developing such guidance, reproducibility-related practices are more likely to be meaningful and feasible. The review points to emerging communities of practice, tools, and training resources that support open qualitative research across Europe and internationally.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

For EU and national science policymakers, funders, publishers & research institutions

- **Adopt community-driven, flexible definitions of reproducibility** that recognise multiple legitimate forms of transparency and accountability in qualitative research.
- **Avoid universal mandates** that require identical practices across all disciplines without clear justification.

- **Align Open Science policies with ethical and legal realities**, including data protection and participant rights.
- **Acknowledge epistemic diversity** as a strength of the European Research Area, not a problem to be corrected.

For research funders

- **Allow justified exemptions and alternatives** to typical Open Science practices for qualitative research.
- **Provide dedicated funding** for qualitative data management, documentation, and ethical access solutions.
- **Support training and capacity-building** in open and transparent qualitative research practices.
- **Evaluate transparency proportionately**, based on research aims and methods.

For research publishers

- **Update journal policies** to recognise qualitative forms of transparency, such as reflexive accounts and detailed methodological reporting.
- **Avoid treating data availability statements as a simple compliance exercise.**
- **Encourage narrative explanations** of how openness was addressed when data cannot be shared.

For research institutions

- **Invest in qualitative-friendly infrastructure**, including repositories and support services.
- **Train research support staff** in qualitative ethics, data governance, and transparency.
- **Recognise and reward good qualitative research practices** in hiring, promotion, and evaluation, irrespective of Open Science standards.

CONCLUSION

The review by Cole et al. (2024) shows that reproducibility and transparency are not incompatible with qualitative research, but they must be understood differently, in line with diverse qualitative research traditions and practices. For EU science policy to be effective, fair, and credible, it must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and support practices that reflect the diversity of research approaches and methods.

By adapting policies to the realities of qualitative research, Europe can strengthen trust in science, protect research participants, and ensure that valuable qualitative insights continue to inform policy and society — both within the EU and around the world.

Cole, N.L., Ulpts, S., Bochynska, A., Kormann, E., Good, M., Leitner, B., and Ross-Hellauer, T., 2024. Reproducibility and replicability of qualitative research: an integrative review of concepts, barriers and enablers [online]. Available from: osf.io/preprints/metaarxiv/n5zkw_v1.