



Editorial

A guide to preregistration: Enhancing transparency while allowing for discovery

Over the last several years we have taken steps at *OBHDP* to foster open-science practices that improve rigor, transparency, reproducibility, trust, and impact (Kouchaki, 2020). To further those efforts, we recently adopted the Level 2 Transparency and Openness Promotion (TOP) guidelines (Baer & Kouchaki, 2025), which provide additional clarity around the journal's expectations. During submission, authors are asked to complete a checklist confirming adherence to our transparency policies and submit an Open Practices Disclosure Form indicating whether studies are preregistered and whether data, materials, and analysis scripts are available in an open-access repository. Going beyond the Level 2 guidelines, *OBHDP* requires new studies conducted during the review process to be preregistered. We note that studies conducted prior to initial submission are not required to be preregistered and the inclusion of a preregistered study is not a precondition of publication. The good news is that the majority of first submissions now include at least one preregistered study, and almost all published studies include one or more preregistered studies. We see this as a significant achievement for the *OBHDP* community.

A theme running through our prior editorials is that improving open-science practices is a learning process for our community. In that spirit, over the past few years we have noticed that the quality of the preregistrations in submitted manuscripts varies considerably; some adhere closely to best practices whereas others need additional precision to qualify as a valid preregistration. The aim of this editorial is not to criticize, but to clarify. Accordingly, we offer practical guidance for our community about what preregistration is and what it is not.

Preregistration simply means writing down your research plan before you collect or analyze data. It is a time-stamped document specifying what you intend to test, how you will test it, and what will “count” as evidence for your proposals. When collecting and analyzing data, scholars make many decisions about the aspects of the study, such as sample size, variables to be included, exclusion criteria, and the appropriate statistical analyses. Without a preregistered plan for these decisions, authors could work backward from the data to determine the decisions that give them the desired outcome (e.g., *p*-hacking). The intent of preregistration is not to add unnecessary bureaucracy or to induce a “gotcha mentality” in the review team, and it is certainly not to exclude all studies that are not preregistered.

Rather, preregistration serves two core purposes. First, if the preregistration is precise, it eliminates researchers' degrees of freedom; if followed exactly, it distinguishes between confirmatory tests (what you predicted in advance) and exploratory analyses (what you discovered after seeing the data or revising your theorizing). Second, if all analytic steps are preregistered, it limits researchers' degrees of freedom in collecting, handling, and analyzing data—choices such as dropping

conditions, excluding observations, redefining measures, or running multiple alternative models until something “works.” In this sense, preregistration adds credibility by communicating clearly to readers: “This is what I committed to before knowing the results”.

For organizational scholars, preregistration does not require predicting every possible contingency. It requires committing to the core elements of your design before results are known: your hypotheses (if applicable), key variables, operationalizations, sampling and exclusion rules, and primary statistical tests. In experiments, this includes specifying manipulations, outcomes, covariates (if any), stopping rules, and analytic models. In archival or field research, it means defining focal variables, model specifications, and criteria for including observations before running the focal analyses. For macro scholars working with established databases, this would often take the form of a pre-analysis plan that commits to the identification strategy, variable operationalizations, sample construction rules, and focal model specification before running models to test the hypotheses.

An important note for researchers using archival data is that preregistration is not solely for experiments and surveys. Macro scholars—who typically work with established databases such as Compustat, BoardEx, SDC, or other large-scale text datasets—can and should preregister their projects. Indeed, a researcher who has constructed and cleaned a dataset but has not yet run their analyses is in an excellent position to preregister. In this situation, rather than focusing on how the data will be collected, the preregistration should outline the planned specifications for the focal model, variable operationalizations, and exclusion/inclusion criteria for observations *before* the hypothesis testing is conducted. The goal is to make a clear pre-commitment to a research plan and then transparently document any subsequent deviations.

Qualitative research can also be preregistered, but the process typically looks different and is more flexible than in quantitative work. Instead of specifying fixed hypotheses and analyses, researchers can preregister elements like their research questions, sampling strategy, data collection methods (e.g., interviews), and planned analytic approach (e.g., thematic analysis), while allowing for iterative changes as insights emerge. This approach emphasizes transparency about initial plans while allowing for the iterative changes and discoveries that characterize qualitative research. Qualitative scholars may find it helpful to use established frameworks such as the Qualitative Preregistration Template (Haven et al., 2020) on OSF, although we note that *OBHDP* does not require scholars to use a specific template or website. Rather than constraining the exploratory nature of qualitative inquiry, preregistration helps authors craft a more credible narrative of how their insights were discovered and refined.

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1. Deviations are fine (and often necessary)

A common misconception is that preregistration locks researchers into a rigid plan. It does not. Deviating from a preregistered analysis is perfectly acceptable. After collecting the data, you may realize that a proposed analysis contains a flaw, that an assumption is violated, that a better analytic approach is available, or that a different set of variables needs to be tested.

Authors should clearly and explicitly document any deviations. We strongly encourage the use of the *Psychological Science* preregistration deviation disclosure table (adapted from Willroth & Atherton, 2024). This table, or a similar method for disclosing deviations, should be included in your Supplemental Online Materials or within your manuscript.

When deviations occur, researchers should explain the change clearly and articulate why it was necessary. Preregistration is not a prison—it is a record of intentions that allows researchers to outline their plans while maintaining flexibility as new insights emerge. We have seen authors become so worried about having deviated from their preregistration that they choose not to disclose the deviation at all. Regrettably, clearly reporting both the preregistration and the deviations would have strengthened the credibility of their work. The research process often involves proposing and testing a theoretical model, revising it, and re-testing a refined version. Authors should be transparent about which analyses were planned and which emerged during this iterative process. In turn, reviewers should recognize that transparency about deviations strengthens, rather than weakens, a manuscript. Our editorial team will ensure that authors are not unfairly penalized by reviewers for disclosing reasonable revisions to their preregistrations.

2. How to preregister in practice

Preregistrations do not need to be long, but they do need to be concrete. In general, we recommend being as detailed as possible about confirmatory components. An ideal preregistration should be so clear and detailed that if you give someone your raw data and your preregistration, they should be able to exactly replicate your final dataset, run your analyses, and determine whether your hypotheses were supported or not. Admittedly, few preregistered studies published in *OBHDP* and neighboring journals meet this criteria, but researchers should keep this goal in mind whenever they are preregistering their studies.

A variety of preregistration formats are available, including AsPredicted, the *APA Preregistration for Quantitative Research in Psychology* template, [ClinicalTrials.gov](https://www.clinicaltrials.gov), and other options hosted through OSF. Once completed, preregistration documents should be uploaded to a public registry platform such as ResearchBox, OSF, or [ClinicalTrials.gov](https://www.clinicaltrials.gov).

a) Fully specify your hypotheses

Confirmatory tests require clear predictions. For example:

“We predict that X will be positively related to Y.”

“The mean of Y will be higher in condition 1 than in condition 2.”

“We expect that Z will moderate the positive effect of X on Y, such that the effect is stronger at high levels of Z than low levels of Z.”

“We expect that X will have a positive indirect effect on Y, through M.”

As demonstrated in these examples, the direction of the relationship (i.e., positive or negative) should be clearly stated. Vague statements such as “we will examine the effect of X on Y” may be appropriate in the earliest stages of a project, but they do not specify what would constitute a confirmatory outcome. As a project matures—such as once data are collected, accessed, or clearly defined—researchers should replace exploratory phrasing with language that articulates precise expectations, decision criteria, and standards for inference. This expectation

applies across methodological approaches. In experimental and survey research, it requires clearly specified hypotheses and analytic plans. In archival and computational work with large-scale datasets, it requires transparent model specifications, variable operationalizations, and validation strategies established prior to confirmatory testing. Regardless of method, confirmatory research demands clarity about what evidence would meaningfully support or challenge the proposed claims.

We note that many preregistration platforms specifically ask about dependent variables, such as AsPredicted's direction to, “Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.” We have seen some authors preregister only the hypothesized relationship between the independent variable and the terminal dependent variable, omitting their predictions regarding the mediator(s) of that relationship. To clarify, if your model has mediators, those are dependent variables in the first stage of the model and must be preregistered. Likewise, those mediators are modeled as predictors of the terminal dependent variable, so those relationships must also be preregistered. In sum, all stages of a model—including mediators and moderators—must be preregistered.

b) Specify your study design

Describe the research design in sufficient detail for readers to understand how evidence will be generated and evaluated. Be explicit about the structure of the design and the logic linking it to your research question. For example, will you use a two-group, factorial, randomized block, repeated measures, or another specified structure? You should also explain how conditions are administered. When possible, preregister the exact stimuli, manipulations, or materials to be used. For computational or large-scale data projects, specify the data-generating environment, preprocessing pipeline, model architecture or analytic framework, and validation strategy.

In addition, fully specify key measures or constructs. For quantitative research, describe precisely how variables are operationalized (e.g., scale anchors, number of items, behavioral indicators, coding rules). For computational analyses, define how variables are engineered, labeled, or derived, including feature construction and transformation decisions.

Over the past few years, the most frequent mistake we have seen with preregistration is not precisely identifying the variables that will be included in the data collection and used in the analyses. In one version of this error, we have seen authors perform primary and supplemental analyses with variables that are not listed in the preregistration (e.g., controlling for neuroticism even though neuroticism is not mentioned in the preregistration). If authors introduce a variable that was not preregistered—even if solely used in a supportive fashion (e.g., a control)—that study should not be labeled a “preregistered study.” Importantly, the authors can retain and present that data, but they should note in the disclosure form that it was not preregistered. Conversely, authors sometimes preregister variables or conditions that then play no role in the reported analyses; when this occurs, they should either report the preregistered tests involving those variables or clearly note in their manuscript and disclosure materials why these preregistered elements were not ultimately analyzed. For instance, a comprehensive survey may be designed to serve multiple distinct studies, such that some preregistered variables are reserved for a different project rather than the focal manuscript. This practice is acceptable if the authors clearly preregister their intent and then follow this plan in their analyses.

We have noticed that many studies preregister multiple alternate tests of the same hypothesis (e.g., with and without a list of control variables). This approach is acceptable if the authors present each of these tests in the manuscript. In contrast, this approach is problematic when authors only report the test that provided a significant result while “burying” the tests that yielded non-significant results in the supplement (or not reporting them at all). Whether intentionally or not, this selective reporting paints an inaccurate picture of the results for the reviewer/reader, who may not have carefully referenced the preregistration or supplement. To reflect the spirit of preregistration, *all* preregistered tests

should be reported in the main text.

You should also specify the sampling strategy, recruitment method, inclusion and exclusion criteria, source of the sample or corpus, and expected duration of data collection. To add precision, the sampling strategy could include a formal power analysis or a clear rationale for the target sample size. A power analysis, which identifies the anticipated effect size and significance thresholds, helps authors demonstrate that their studies are sufficiently powered to provide meaningful evidence for the hypothesized relationships. For large-scale or computational datasets, describe the population frame, data acquisition process, filtering rules, and any algorithmic or platform-based constraints that shape the sample.

For archival or secondary data, describe how the dataset will be constructed, merged, cleaned, and prepared for analysis. For computational pipelines, detail preprocessing steps, handling of missing data, training/test splits, and robustness or validation procedures. Across all methods, transparency about how data are generated, selected, and prepared is essential for interpretability and reproducibility.

c) Specify the analysis in detail

Across all methods, the goal of preregistration is to transparently outline what analyses will be conducted and how evidence will be judged. Clear specification strengthens the credibility of both confirmatory and theory-building research.

For quantitative research, clearly identify the statistical model(s) to be estimated (e.g., ANOVA, regression, multilevel modeling, SEM, causal inference frameworks), list all variables and interactions, and specify covariates, subgroup analyses, planned contrasts, and follow-up tests. If analyses depend on assumption checks (e.g., normality, independence, multicollinearity), manipulation checks, model fit indices, convergence criteria, or robustness tests, specify thresholds in advance. For interaction terms, preregister how simple effects will be probed and reported. For example, specify whether conditional effects will be examined using planned contrasts for categorical moderators. For continuous moderators, indicate whether effects will be probed using simple slopes at specified values (e.g., 1 SD above and below the mean, theoretically meaningful cutoffs such as established BMI categories, the Johnson–Neyman technique) or using generalized additive models (GAMs).

For archival and large-scale observational data, describe the modeling strategy, identification assumptions, and steps taken to address confounding, endogeneity, or selection bias (e.g., fixed effects, instrumental variables, matching, difference-in-differences). Specify data filtering rules, aggregation levels, and any preprocessing decisions that affect inference. Clearly outline robustness checks and sensitivity analyses that will assess whether findings are stable across reasonable analytic alternatives.

For computational or machine learning approaches, describe the full analytic pipeline: preprocessing, model architecture, tuning procedures, and validation strategy (e.g., cross-validation, holdout sets, preregistered train/test splits). Specify performance metrics and the criteria for model comparison. For LLM-based analyses, ensure that prompts are clearly reported and preregistered, and that key model hyperparameters (e.g., *temperature*, which controls how deterministic versus random the output is) are also reported and preregistered.

d) Separate exploratory components

Exploratory measures, conditions, or analyses should be described in the preregistration. Many preregistration platforms provide a separate section for exploratory components; if your platform of choice does not have this section, ensure that your confirmatory versus exploratory components are clearly labeled. Both confirmatory and exploratory work are valuable, the distinction is what matters.

A common error we see is that authors preregister a primary analysis

with one variable yet conduct the primary analysis with a supplemental/exploratory variable. For example, authors might hypothesize that engagement predicts task performance, while noting that they will also collect citizenship behavior. This practice is fully acceptable. The problem comes when authors' final model for that study tests the relationship between engagement and citizenship, *without noting* that this was an exploratory relationship. To follow best practices, the authors should acknowledge—within the manuscript—that they hypothesized an effect of engagement on task performance yet pivoted to an exploratory analysis. The authors might then decide to enhance support for their model by conducting a preregistered follow-up study that clearly hypothesizes the effect of engagement on citizenship behavior. To repeat an earlier point, preregistration does not prevent a project from evolving in response to the evidence. Rather, preregistration requires authors to document the evolution process.

Some of the exploratory analyses you ultimately conduct may not have been preregistered. For example, you may identify additional robustness checks that could be informative for the reader. This type of deviation is not a violation of the spirit of preregistration if you clearly note that these explorations were not preregistered. In contrast, it is a substantial concern when authors introduce new variables that were not mentioned in the preregistration. In that case, readers will question whether other variables were also included in data collection yet were not utilized because those robustness checks/supplemental analyses undermined their proposals.

3. Additional steps that improve transparency

Preregistration is only one tool for improving research credibility and facilitating the review process. As mentioned at the outset, *OBHDP's* adoption of Level 2 TOP guidelines requires submitting authors to complete a (1) checklist confirming adherence to transparency policies and (2) an Open Practices Disclosure Form indicating whether studies are preregistered and whether data, materials, and analysis scripts are available in an open-access repository. Going beyond simple disclosure, we encourage authors to share all study materials (e.g., experiment protocols with manipulations, survey keys with all measures), data, and analysis code. These materials can help clarify procedures, reduce ambiguity about analytic decisions, and identify potential coding errors. These sharing practices also enhance transparency by clearly displaying to readers that the data collection adhered to the preregistration. Authors may describe and justify constraints that prevent public data sharing; in many cases, data can still be shared confidentially with editors or reviewers for verification purposes.

Finally, we encourage authors to remind the reader of the confirmatory and exploratory components of each study in the Results and Discussion sections. We have seen authors briefly mention a deviation in a footnote and then, throughout the rest of the manuscript, implicitly and/or explicitly treat the analyses as if they were all preregistered and confirmatory. For example, authors might preregister their hypothesis that X has an indirect effect on Y through variable M. Their preregistration might also state that they will explore a list of potential alternate mechanisms (e.g., variables C, D, and E). Although the hypothesized effect of X on Y through M is not supported, the authors nonetheless claim, "As predicted, we tested the effect of X on Y through D. We found a significant effect." The authors might have technically disclosed that variable D was exploratory, but the description of the test implies that it was confirmatory. We encourage you to avoid this type of language, as it leads readers to an inaccurate conclusion.

Robustness checks, alternative operationalizations, and supplemental analyses can be reported in an appendix or online materials, as long as a reader of the main text would not reach an inaccurate or incomplete conclusion. For example, authors should avoid "burying" preregistered robustness tests that yield null or unexpected results in an online supplement while reporting supportive tests in the main text. To be transparent, authors might include a table that clearly identifies when

alternative tests align or misalign with the main results; authors could then confidently place the robustness checks in a supplement without worry that readers will draw the wrong conclusion.

A quick thought exercise can help you avoid unintentionally misleading the reader. Ask yourself whether readers who solely view the manuscript and readers who also open your preregistration would come to a similar conclusion about your adherence to the preregistration. If readers who open your preregistration will spot additional discrepancies and deviations, your within-manuscript explanations need to be more transparent.

4. Closing thought

Preregistration distinguishes prediction from discovery, limits unnecessary flexibility, and increases trust in the empirical evidence. For organizational research—where datasets are complex and analytic choices are numerous—this clarity is especially valuable. The goal of preregistration is transparency, not rigidity. It allows for creativity and exploration while making it clear which insights were anticipated and which emerged through engagement with the data. When authors are explicit about that distinction, they strengthen not only their manuscripts, but also the cumulative credibility and impact of our field.

As a reminder, OBHDP accepts submissions with non-preregistered studies, and lack of preregistration alone is not a reason for rejection, although preregistered evidence can strengthen a paper. We note,

however, that, any new data collected during the review process must be preregistered.

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