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Symposium: Linking Interpretation and Causal Inference

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Introduction

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How do our interpretations link up to our causal claims? How does attention to causality refine our interpretations? In one sense, it is strange that we find ourselves asking these questions. After all, interpretive researchers routinely find themselves using causal language, and scholars oriented toward establishing causal claims also spend much time interpreting actors' motivations and beliefs. If political scientists *ipso facto* do both, what's the big deal?

In another sense, the fact that we pose these questions (which structured an APSA panel in 2015) speaks to a particular moment in the discipline. Consider the institutional architecture of APSA, wherein Interpretive Methodologies and Methods is officially designated by APSA as a "related group" that is separate from the QMMR section. Does this institutional architecture reflect how our research communities actually work? The hunch that authors in this symposium share is that it does not.

The purpose of this symposium is to take stock of recent thinking about methods, methodology, epistemology, and ontology that proposes the forging of links between hermeneutic and causality-oriented analysis. A variety of perspectives is represented below, but if there is one thing that all authors agree upon, it is that the two are not mutually exclusive. The question they all tackle is this: what are the specific links that may be forged? Moreover, what are the ways to make these links most productive?

By interpretation, the authors below have in mind attention to the meaning-making processes that—depending on one's intellectual taste—either characterize an important part of the human experience or constitute its core. By causal inference, they have in mind attention to establishing explanatory claims—either about particular instances or about a class of events. Both of these understandings, as we will see, are fairly general and leave two crucial questions open for further debate: (1) to what extent and in what ways must causal accounts pay attention to meaning-making, and (2) what kinds of simplification are ultimately most productive?

The four papers below contribute to these discussions based on the authors' various, original, theoretically-grounded and empirically-rich research. In a sense, it is not surprising that where one comes down on the above questions is in part a function of whether one begins with ethnography, with process-tracing approaches, with discourse analysis, or with another approach entirely. Each approach brings different sorts of leverage and intellectual inclinations to the research endeavor. Yet, it is in another sense strange that one's inclinations about foundational matters in the philosophy of science would be a function of the methods one uses.

Ludvig Norman offers to fuse process-tracing approaches with a specific focus on meaning-making processes. Illustrating via his own work on the evolving decision-making powers of the European Union, he proposes *interpretive process tracing* as an approach that allows scholars to identify types of causal mechanisms rarely considered in our discipline. The result is not just a thicker account; it is a more plausible one.

Steven Samford also suggests that a thicker account can be fundamentally different and more convincing than its thinner alternatives. Taking a page from political sociology, he considers how social network analysis (SNA) is enriched via ethnographic immersion, showing that patterns of regulatory compliance in Mexico are hard to interpret without sustained attention to the social meanings at play in particular fieldwork sites.

For their part, Erica Simmons and Nicholas Smith invite political ethnographers—who often grapple with interpretive approaches—to consider techniques from the comparativist's toolbox. Based on research from their respective books on Bolivia/Mexico and South Africa, they argue that such *comparative ethnography* broadens the scope of generalizations offered while retaining an ethnographic sensibility that is faithful to shared meanings in particular contexts.

In what is perhaps the most methodologically ambitious of the symposium contributions, Bentley Allan and Ted Hopf discuss their decade-long project to build a national-identity dataset based on textual materials dating from 1810. *Making Identity Count* promises to offer a treasure trove of numerical data that rests upon painstaking interpretation of national identities via inductive discourse analysis.

In the paper that concludes the symposium, I take stock of our collective stock-taking. I propose that we advance our conversations about linking causal inference and interpretation only to the extent that we pay close attention to polyvalent meanings behind the words invoked to unite our research traditions.

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