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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>My thanks to Tim Pachirat and Peri Schwartz-Shea for their comments on an earlier draft, which helped me make some of my tacit knowledge about these methods more explicit, and to John Gerring for his editorial suggestions. The epigraph comes from a post by Tom Nichols to the Perestroika listserv (October 3, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>One could count, for example, the large number of hours of observation, the number of conversations held, the number of interactions, and the ensuing number of segments of interaction and/or conversation analyzed over the course of the research project. In some sense, each one of these constitutes an "observation" as that term is used in quantitative analyses.

<sup>3</sup>The phrase is Mark Bevir's, made in the closing discussion at the recent (2003) APSA roundtable on constructivist and interpretive methods.

<sup>4</sup>For discussions of these debates and references to original sources, see, e.g., Abbagnano (1967), Hawkesworth (1988), Polkinghorne (1983), Rabinow and Sullivan (1979). Although Hawkesworth's book is addressed to the field of policy analysis, the first half constitutes an excellent delineation of the philosophical issues at hand.

<sup>5</sup>Many critical theorists have accused phenomenologists, in particular, of disregarding issues of power and structure in their focus on the Self. Whereas this criticism may well hold at the level of philosophy, once one brings interpretive philosophies into the practical realm of political studies, one can hardly escape questions of power and structure. Hence, the overlap of concerns with some critical theory.

<sup>6</sup>Such data are "accessed" more than they are "gathered" or "collected." Neither acts nor, one hopes, objects or agency documents are removed from the field setting in which they occurred. What is brought back are the researcher's copious interview and/or observational notes, although copies of documents, interview tapes, and the like may be brought out of the field. This makes creating a database for other researchers' use problematic.

<sup>7</sup>I thank Tim Pachirat (personal correspondence, 2003) for drawing my attention to the fact that positivist and interpretive researchers most likely understand "testability" — as reflected in the statement "I was wrong about my findings" — in different ways. The difference reflects, at least, the distinction between seeing findings as reflections of objective reality and seeing them as constructions of that reality. I think his observation is correct. I have in mind the willingness to subject one's findings to scrutiny in an attitude of humility in the face of the possibility that one might be wrong, coupled with the passionate conviction that one is right (cf. Yanow 1997). I do not have the space to develop that point more fully here.

<sup>8</sup>But such a meaning-focused study is unlikely to tackle 150 disparate cultural sites!

<sup>9</sup>This point about readers' interpretations lies at the heart of "reader-response" arguments in literary theory; see, e.g., Iser (1989). The strongest argumentation for using aspects of the interviewer to elicit responses, including for responding critically when told something one disagrees with, is a contested issue among interview researchers. See, e.g., Holstein and Gubrium (1995) for one view.

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## Is it Possible to do Quantitative Survey Research in an Interpretive Way?

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.998757>

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I've been asked to address the question, Is it possible to do quantitative survey research in an interpretive way?, which requires first identifying what an "interpretive way" is. I will consider three ways of distinguishing interpretive research — in terms of its objectives, epistemological assumptions, and modes for analyzing empirical materials. My question, thus, becomes, Is quantitative survey research, as ordinarily practiced, capable of achieving interpretive research objectives,

reflecting interpretive epistemological assumptions, and enabling interpretive modes of analysis? And, To what extent can survey research practices be modified to incorporate an interpretivist project? I offer these comments as a quantitative survey researcher who is struggling to understand the challenges posed to survey research by interpretive approaches.

### Research Objectives

Let's say that the objective of interpretive political research is to understand how people make sense of political phenomena, to understand what any given political problem or policy or action or event means to them. If so, we immediately confront a disjuncture with survey research as it is ordinarily practiced. Much survey research in political science is *not* focused on how people make sense of politics, how they experience and understand it. Instead, it focuses on how some measurable property, A (e.g., a person's level of education), relates to another measurable property, B (e.g., a person's level of support for affirmative action policies), by way of testing causal hypotheses about the force exerted by A on B.

But, still, lots of other survey-based research in political science *is* directly interested in depicting what people believe and how they feel about political phenomena, not merely in establishing regularities between pairs of "objective" attributes. The numerous examples include work on how people understand and explain racial inequality, the "party images" research on how people understand the policies and values political parties advocate and the constituencies they serve, and the studies of Americans' dissatisfaction with campaigns and government.

Moreover, even if the question of interest to survey researchers concerns the causal link between attributes—say, that between education and opinion on affirmative action—the lingering question of mechanism shifts researchers attention back to peoples' ideas and experiences. Attempting to understand why education influences opinions on affirmative action leads survey researchers to ask how people who differ in their educational achievement come to differ in their beliefs, feelings, and experiences concerning affirmative action, which then produce differences in opinion. In short, mechanism questions invite rather than preclude exploration of the subjective.

Even so, such an enterprise—fitting "meaning" into an explanation of the link between two objective attributes—may still be found wanting. It either implicitly or explicitly entails that meaning is shared among those who share objective attributes like education levels, and only differ in important ways (so as to make them worthy of study) among those who differ in objective attributes. Further, it privileges objective attributes as the prime movers in the story of where politically consequential outcomes come from.

### Epistemological Assumptions

Even if survey research hones in on an interpretive objective, perhaps it will fail to honor an interpretive epistemology.

I offer four such objections to quantitative survey research.

1. Survey research's attempts to uncover people's beliefs and feelings impose a view of the relevant phenomenon on the respondent. This is usually by way of "closed-ended" questions that impose the researcher's own beliefs and commitments—be they articulated (as, for example, via operational definitions of concepts), or implicit (as, for example, via ideological bias). To take an example, survey researchers have long been interested in whether citizens' policy views have a self-interested basis. For any given policy, researchers usually first stipulate what kinds of interests are at stake, and then stipulate ("measure") for whom the policy is advantageous and for whom it is detrimental. They do not ask people what interests they see at stake, or how they see their own interests furthered or hindered by a policy.

They could, of course, move in this direction. Indeed, the survey tool of the "open-ended": question is designed to accommodate this objection.<sup>1</sup> In some pilot work that I conducted, using open-ended questions in a large-scale survey, I found that people's own sense of their interests did not conform to the conceptualization usually provided by researchers. For example, people worried a lot about whether a national health care plan would restrict their freedom to choose health insurance coverage levels, providers, doctors, and the like. The typical approach to studying self-interest ignores beliefs concerning freedom of choice, placing it in the realm of values and not interests.<sup>2</sup>

2. Survey research, with its emphasis on standardized interviews and interviewing techniques, treats the research enterprise as obtaining a "pure" or "true" response from the subject, and fails to appreciate that the researcher and subject, or at least the interviewer and subject, are engaged in an interaction that jointly produces the results. Particularly if one tries to move away from closed-ended toward more open-ended questioning, interviewers must be recognized as actively involved in the creation and interpretation of survey responses.

Survey researchers are, of course, aware of this to some extent, as reflected in work on "interviewer effects." Scholars like Lynn Sanders and Darren Davis, for example, have studied how the race of one's interviewer seems to shape survey responses and interpret these findings substantively, as the result of racially charged interactions in the survey interview setting. Still, most survey researchers view interviewer effects in a manner much less compatible with the interpretivist epistemological perspective: interviewers can be sources of both random and systematic error, which to the extent possible must be eradicated through improved training and interviewing techniques.

3. Survey research is doomed to fail in truly discovering how people make sense of politics and where those meanings come from because it abstracts individuals from their social and institutional contexts. My sense, and I confess I am not at all clear on this, is that scholars pursuing interpretive work believe that one cannot rightly come to understand what any one person believes without studying the beliefs of other people who are embedded in her life, and the beliefs of others that are embedded in her life through the media, curricula, novels, and

the like. The inherent intersubjectivity of meaning cannot be revealed by the methodological individualism of traditional survey research.

Perhaps this criticism of survey research, if valid, could be accommodated by moving to research designs that introduce network sampling and that link survey and media data. Put another way, it does not appear to be survey research, itself, that is the problem here but the typical research design that uses survey-based data collection. This might be remedied by sampling members of a relevant community (or network) and analyzing the data by connecting part to whole, as well as by linking survey data on individuals to data on the media (and other texts) they consume.

4. Survey research is incapable of fully revealing meaning because it relies merely on self-reports, i.e. language, and ignores how meaning is represented in other artifacts—acts, objects—that need to be observed, directly. Without joining observational data and self-report data any understanding of the subjective lives of individuals will be impoverished. Moreover, survey research doesn't even do a good job at getting at meaning as revealed in language. One cannot simply ask people questions and expect meanings to pop out. This is for one or both of two reasons. (A) People cannot consciously access and articulate all that they feel and believe.<sup>3</sup> (B) The question and response mode of survey research, even when open-ended questions are employed, is inadequate to the task of revealing how people do make sense of political phenomena. One needs to elicit stories or narratives, for example, and employ the many other conversational tools of in-depth interviewing in order to generate the empirical materials capable of illuminating meaning.

### Modes of Analysis

A final possibility is that the modes of interpretive analysis are incompatible with the quantitative analysis of survey data.<sup>4</sup> At least two different ideas are involved here.

The claim that important beliefs are inaccessible, mentioned above, emerges from a variety of psychological theories including those of psychodynamics and cognitive linguistics. Used to inform interpretive work, they suggest ways of analyzing texts that seem blatantly at odds with standard quantitative coding techniques. Take cognitive linguistics, for example. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, if you are interested in discovering how people think about something complex and abstract like the harm of pornography you must begin by getting the right kind of data; you must elicit a wide range of impressions about pornographic media and its use by individuals and across society. But then these verbal materials must be scrutinized for how the language people use reveals the metaphors they are implicitly but not explicitly using, and which reveal unarticulated, inarticulatable beliefs. This kind of ("latent coding") analysis is certainly at odds with the manifest coding of open-ended materials that typifies the survey researcher's work.

The more standard criticism of quantitative survey analysis involves the classic variable-centered vs. case-centered

(nomothetic vs. idiographic) dichotomy. Even if one were able to expand the verbal materials obtained in large-n research and subject them to sophisticated latent coding prior to a quantification step, any subsequent statistical analysis would link variable to variable. It would focus on how individual differences of one kind (variable 1) relate to individual differences of another kind (variable 2). From an interpretive perspective one might argue that two analytical errors are thus made. Because the chosen variables are abstracted from the rest that make up the case as a whole no single case is adequately represented in the analysis.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the between-person analysis technique does not illuminate what is going on within individuals.

Of course, survey analysts can respond to some extent by building in complex statistical interactions between variables, which moves them in the direction of a more case-centered analysis (looking at how outcomes vary across individuals defined by collections of attributes simultaneously). But the statistical tools currently available won't take one far in this direction.

### Final Thoughts

I think it stimulating and productive to move questions like the conflict between interpretive and quantitative research to the concrete plane of actual practice. Such a dialogue is capable of enhancing researchers' methodological self-awareness and perhaps even spurring innovation—improving the work of those in each mode and maybe even motivating a substantive (not methodological) dialogue between them. Ultimately, I believe that the epistemology of interpretivism is so roundly incompatible with the positivism underlying many quantitative survey research practices that there is no way to fully reconcile the two. Still, as I have tried to suggest, there are points of accommodation. Speaking as a survey researcher, I think I benefit from thinking about the interpretivist challenge (which I cannot claim to have gotten right here). I have a better, and more reflective, sense of the particular epistemological viewpoint that underlies that data collection and analysis tools I use, and I am at least sometimes stirred to alter or abandon them in the face of their limitations.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Still, even open-ended questions embed researchers' assumptions and choices, and studies have shown that minor variation in question wording can elicit widely different responses.

<sup>2</sup>My favorite published example of survey-based public opinion research that seriously attempts to grapple with this general criticism from interpretivists is Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, Amy Fried, John L. Sullivan, and Mary Dietz's "Mixing Methods: A Multistage Strategy for Studying Patriotism and Citizen Participation" (in *Political Analysis*, ed. James Stimson, 3: 89-121. 1991). Rather than simply designing survey questions to tap "patriotism" as they, themselves, define it, Theiss-Morse et al. first try to uncover how "ordinary Americans" think about patriotism using small-n, intensive research and modes of analysis. They then develop survey questions based on the insights generated in this stage of their research.



<sup>3</sup>But clues to people's beliefs and feelings may still be found in the language they use, as I discuss below.

<sup>4</sup>My distinction between "epistemological assumptions" or issues and "modes of analysis" is artificial and the latter might best be subsumed under the former. But what I had to say in the last section was about the data survey research provides while in this section I am focusing in on what quantitative analysts do with that data.

<sup>5</sup>Of course, one need not know "everything" about a case before one knows anything; indeed, such a claim is incoherent. But I think that interpretivist analysis requires simultaneously taking into account many different aspects or attributes of a case.

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## What Might It Mean to Be an "Interpretivist"?

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Attention to "interpretivism" has become a vital topic in the methodological conversations that this new APSA section both reflects and promotes. However it remains unclear just what is meant by talk of an interpretive approach. This ambiguity leaves some political scientists skeptical as to whether interpretivists study topics or employ methods that involve more than a rhetorical break with established practices in the discipline. I believe that interpretivism can and should be taken as a distinctive approach to political science, but that it is incumbent upon interpretivists to articulate more specifically just what their underlying commitments are and how these diverge from those of other approaches. As I see it, the test of any such articulation will be whether it can persuade skeptics that something distinctive really is being proposed.

In this essay, I consider several points that have been emphasized in articulations of what it might mean to be an "interpretivist." I first suggest that some common points of emphasis fail to win over skeptics because they simply do not identify a criterion that persuasively differentiates interpretivism from other approaches to political science. I then turn to interpretivism's concern with the intersubjective dimension of meaning. I believe that this is the point most capable of providing a differentiating criterion, but that efforts to articulate interpretivism on this basis also bring out divisions among interpretivists—in particular, between structuralist and intentionalist variants of interpretivism. I close by proposing that, if they wish to persuasively articulate a divergence from established practices in political science, intentionalists should supplement their claims about intersubjectivity with attention to the character of explanation.

Articulations of interpretivism commonly emphasize the anti-positivism of the approach. However, this point fails to speak to skeptics. The meaning of "positivism" is no clearer

than that of "interpretivism" (on positivism, see Dessler's contribution to this symposium) and hence the content of any such dichotomous contrast is highly ambiguous. Moreover, since few political scientists today identify themselves with positivism, an emphasis on anti-positivism does not communicate to this audience any specifics about just how interpretivists might differ from them.

Some more headway, but not much more, is made by articulations that emphasize taking meanings seriously. Such articulations do differentiate interpretivists from scholars who explicitly bypass meanings in favor of a focus on "objective" features of society, polity, and/or economy (ex. Skocpol 1979: chap. 1). But they leave unclear how interpretivism stands in relation to established political science research traditions whose practitioners would also claim a concern with meanings—conceptualized variously in terms of ideas, opinions, attitudes, values, beliefs, etc. Political scientists on the whole have never given widespread support to approaches that reject attention to meanings; and few, if any, in the discipline ever bought into the argument that a concern with meanings is incompatible with the drive to be scientific. Indeed many practitioners of two of the discipline's most self-consciously "scientific" research traditions—behavioral survey research and rational-choice scholarship—would assert that meanings are basic to their approach. A persuasive articulation of the claim that interpretivism is something tangibly different must hence go beyond merely emphasizing attention to meanings. It must specify just how an interpretive approach breaks with the manner in which established traditions conceptualize meanings, conduct research into them, and employ the findings of such research in their pursuit of further goals of inquiry.

When we shift away from the generic point of attending to meanings to more specific questions about how meanings are conceptualized, a break between interpretivism and other approaches does come into focus. Indeed, if pressed to choose a criterion differentiating contemporary interpretivists, there is perhaps no better candidate than their commitment to incorporating intersubjectivity into the way that we conceptualize meanings. From Charles Taylor's classic "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man" (1971), to Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan's overview of "The Interpretive Turn" (1979), to the more recent formulations of such figures as Alexander Wendt (1992), scholars charting the commitments of interpretivism consistently turn to the notion of intersubjectivity. They argue that meanings should not be conceptualized solely in *subjective* terms as something that exists in the minds of individuals considered in isolation from one another, but also need to be understood in *intersubjective* terms as something bound up with concrete contexts of shared social practices and interacting individuals.

Now, pausing to give our skeptics a chance to respond, I imagine that they would acknowledge talk of intersubjectivity as marking at least a rhetorical break, but would also follow up with nagging worries as to what exactly this talk adds up to. When so pressed to explicate their commitment to intersubjectivity, interpretivists seem to me to have two different responses available. On the one hand, they may flesh