

www.apsanet.org/mtgs/divisions/division47.cfm. We also anticipate that the short course on Field Methods will be offered again in 2004.

Newsletter

Thanks to John Gerring's editorial leadership, the section newsletter is already among the best of its kind. The newsletter combines up to date information on section activities, substantial discussion of methodological questions, and useful information about developments and publications in the discipline. This second issue is being sent only to section members — if you got it from a colleague, we encourage you to sign up for the section (see below) to receive the newsletter in the future. The first issue can be downloaded at: <http://asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/Newsletter.html>.

Section Membership and How to Join

The section's membership doubled from August to October and now stands at more than 475 members. If you are not already a member, in order to receive this newsletter and enjoy the other benefits of section membership, please sign up now. The procedure for doing so is quick and easy and can be found at: <http://asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/JoinSection.html>.

Book, Article, and Paper Awards

The section has established the Giovanni Sartori Book Award, the Alexander L. George Article Award, and the Sara and George McCune Sage Paper Award. In the coming weeks the section will set up committees for these awards, announce them to section members via email, and post them on the web site. Further details on these awards can be found at <http://asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/Awards.html>.

Web Site

The section's web site (<http://asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/QualitativeMethodsAPSA.html>) is a work-in-progress, but is already getting lots of traffic. As noted above, it has links for joining the section as well as links on the newsletter and the section's awards. The web site is jointly organized with the Consortium on Qualitative Research Methods (CQRM) and has links to CQRM's January Institute on Qualitative Research Methods as well as syllabi and working papers.

That's it for now. If you have any suggestions for moving the section forward, I hope you'll share them with me.

Symposium: Interpretivism

Responses to any of the issues discussed in this symposium or any future symposium may be posted on our web site or, pending space, in the next issue of the newsletter. (Letters should be sent to the editor as an email attachment.)

Interpretations of Interpretivism

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What is interpretivism?¹ As is common with broad methodological debates, much hinges on matters of definition. Interpretivism might be defined residually — as non-positivism. However, this scarcely clarifies the matter, as noted by Robert Adcock and David Dessler in their contributions to this symposium. We might start with David Laitin's suggestion that interpretivism refers to interpretation or clarification — rendering the ambiguous into a clearer form. This is true enough, so far as it goes. However, in current usage the term seems to carry a good deal more freight.²

At an epistemological level, interpretivism might be looked upon as a form of truth-construction that relies on tests of *coherence* rather than (or in addition to) *correspondence* with external reality. Thus, interpretivists derive meaning by looking at the context of an action or event, its connection to a surrounding set of actions, events, and interpretations.

Interpretivism, classically, involves an appeal to an imagined whole. The term is also sometimes employed as a broad rubric encompassing all (or most) non-quantitative forms of analysis within the social sciences. All interpretivists will agree that they are in search of "inter-subjective" meanings, which are contrasted with "subjective" meanings and "objective" facts. All interpretivists agree on the importance of closely attending to the meanings that are attached to a set of actions or events by the participants under study; interpretivism is self-consciously actor-centered. For this reason, interpretivists sometimes refer to their object of study as *textual*. Although it may not comprise a written text, it nonetheless is approached in much the same way as a literary critic (or biblical exegete) approaches a text. Hence, the link to biblical hermeneutics and the *Verstehen* tradition (Gadamer 1975).

In many respects, interpretivism may be regarded as occupying a middling position between the ideals of naturalism (aka 'positivism') and post-modernism. It is consistent with the practice of old-fashioned literary criticism, particularly that focusing on authorial intentions (Hoy 1982), and with the disciplines of anthropology and history. It occupies a small, or perhaps not so small (again, the matter of definition is crucial), niche in political science and sociology.

The reader will note from the foregoing discussion that my definition of the subject relies primarily on interpretivism as it took form in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in work by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), Clifford Geertz (1973, 1979a, 1979b), E.D. Hirsch (1967), Albert Hirschman (1970), Alasdair MacIntyre (1971), Charles Taylor (1985), Georg Henrik von Wright (1971), and Peter Winch (1958).³ Regrettably – from the point of view of clarity – the term has been appropriated in recent years for a range of usages that are difficult to differentiate from post-modernism or post-structuralism. However, since the work of Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, Lyotard, and Foucault is fundamentally at odds with the work of Gadamer et al., I think it makes sense to keep these two methodological/epistemological subjects in separate boxes.

With this preliminary definition of the subject on the table, I shall now turn my attention to several methodological questions raised by the theory and practice of interpretivism. Most of these issues have been vetted previously. Even so, it may be helpful by way of entrée to our symposium to run through the catechism in a peremptory fashion. Many of these issues will be touched upon at greater length – and with considerably greater subtlety – in the remaining, more focused, contributions to this symposium. Consider this an entrée *outré* into a difficult subject, a probing of difficult questions. There will be ten, in all.

To begin with, it might be questioned whether interpretivism is better approached as a philosophy of social science, or even an epistemology, rather than a specific research agenda or method. There are few interpretivist “hand-books,” and many philosophical declamations. This is beginning to change, as recent Sage catalogs attest. Even so, the status of interpretivism seems somewhat different from its paradigmatic competitors, rational choice and behavioralism, which eschew philosophical discussion and are eminently practical (in the sense of showing practitioners how to practice the trade). Behavioralism and interpretivism are reverse-images of each other in this respect; one offers a ‘bare-foot’ program of research, the other a program of reflection with some suggestions about the practical business of studying social phenomena. Indeed, the most influential interpretivists (e.g., Gadamer, Hirschman, MacIntyre, Ricoeur, Taylor, Winch) are best known for their general-philosophical statements, not for their fieldwork (Geertz is a notable exception). Many are philosophers by trade. Thus, one might wonder whether we are comparing apples and oranges when we compare interpretivism with its supposed rivals. Arguably, the intention of interpretivism is to question the epistemological underpinnings of all work in the social sciences, not to show anyone how to do it. It addresses the question, What is it that we are doing when we do social science?, not How should we do social science? I do not intend to engage these epistemological debates here; I raise them only because they bear directly on this symposium. Here, we are treating interpretivism as a purported *method*. Whether it is appropriate to do so is the first question that we ought to consider. If it is not, then we have embarked on a fundamentally misguided venture.

Second, does interpretivism refer simply to non-causal explanations (aka descriptive propositions), proximal causal arguments or causal processes?⁴ Or, alternatively, does interpretivism also invite speculation about deep-rooted (‘structural’) causal factors? Plausibly, close attention to actor rationality and to the particulars of a given research setting preclude the consideration of long-distance causes. Indeed, one finds few such arguments in the interpretivist canon. Here, causes are often treated as ‘constitutive’ (Wendt 1998, 1999), or as indistinct ‘processes’ where the cause and effect are so intermingled that it is difficult to tell one from the other. There are few exogenous causal factors in the interpretive universe. At the same time, interpretivists do not appear to have given up on big-C causation. Thus, it remains a point of ambiguity.

Third, does interpretivism generate propositions (descriptive or causal) that are *falsifiable*? Do their research programs, invoking a phrase from Lakatos, culminate in testable arguments? Alternately stated, how many interpretations of a given social phenomenon are possible, and how might one determine good interpretations from bad ones? This discussion is clouded over by a degree of ambiguity surrounding the concept of falsifiability, which Popper saw, quite properly, as a matter of degrees (Popper 1934/1968), and which subsequent work has further amended (e.g., Lakatos 1978). But the general idea is not in doubt. In order to be considered true, or possibly true (Popper himself affected an extreme epistemological skepticism), an argument must risk the possibility of being false. This means, in practical terms, that propositions, and the research programs that they are embedded in, should be specific about the outcomes that they seek to describe or explain; they should identify rival hypotheses; they should identify a research design (a specifiable procedure) to test the proposition, as well as rival hypotheses; and this research design should be replicable, so that future scholars can revisit the matter. I am employing scientific jargon here, but the basic ideas are not alien to rational thought in all areas, as Popper constantly sought to emphasize. In any case, there is room for argument over the extent to which interpretivists a) embrace the norm of falsifiability and b) achieve it in their work.

Fourth, does interpretivism exclude a consideration of factors that lie outside the ‘intersubjective’ realm – i.e., they are not constituted primarily by actors or by language but are, rather, objective (existing independently of human perception)? What about, for instance, the role of biological features of the human condition such as cognitive processing (Lakoff 1987); geography (Diamond 1997); or abstract institutions such as an electoral system (Taagepera and Shugart 1989)? Consider, as well, motivations that are in some sense universal rather than culturally constructed such as self-interest (the cornerstone of rational choice). Are all these issues outside the purview of interpretivism? Of course, interpretivists might respond that these factors enter the realm of interpretivism *insofar as they are culturally constructed*. Even so, this means that interpretivists are limited to examining the particular within the universal. Thus, while interpretivists might acknowledge, with Chomsky, that language contains some purely cognitive

(pre-cultural) factors, language evidently takes different forms at different times and places. The interpretivist would presumably be interested in the latter, not the former. Ditto for factors such as geographies and electoral systems; they provide a universal structure within which differences appear.

This discussion raises an important issue of a substantive nature. Does interpretivism commit one to a view of the world that grants causal priority to intersubjectivity (i.e., to culture, language, or thought) vis-à-vis various objective/structural factors? Evidently, one is not likely to be terribly interested in studying intersubjective meanings if these are largely super-structural. For the Marxist, the rational-chooser, and the cultural materialist (e.g., Harris 1979), intersubjective meanings are interesting only as dependent variables. In the writings of interpretivists, one finds implicit agreement on what one might label the relative autonomy of culture or intersubjectivity. Turtles rest upon turtles rest upon turtles; there is no ultimate ground. Social science is all about interpretations, ultimately.

Fifth, is quantitative analysis excluded from the interpretivist palette? Does one leave the realm of interpretivism as soon as one begins to count? For example, one might question why a study that involves talking to a small number of people in an unstructured manner (Hochschild 1981; Lane 1962) is interpretivist while talking to a large number of people in a more structured format (Campbell et al. 1960; Verba et al. 1995) is not. The issue of numeracy, particularly as pertains to survey research, is addressed at length in Laura Stoker's and Dvora Yanow's contributions to this symposium. Although it seems to be generally understood that interpretivists do not rely primarily on things that can be counted to reach insight into a topic (is there a single example of an interpretivist work based primarily on quantitative analysis?), they certainly do not exclude themselves from the realm of quantitative analysis. Again, one encounters an element of ambiguity in how interpretivism should be defined.

Sixth, how much leeway should the observer be granted in the act of interpretation? Are meanings understandable by the participants to be granted priority over meanings that lie outside the consciousness and language of participants? How much 'abstraction' from the brute facts should be allowed? Interpretivists do not generally go as far as ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel 1967) in this regard; they believe that some sort of reconstruction is necessary. But it is rather unclear (and rarely addressed) how much analytical license may be granted, while still remaining within the interpretive tradition. To clarify this zone of ambiguity, interpretivists may wish to appeal to the proper boundaries of a given intersubjective realm ('culture'); they are particularly reticent to generalize on a global scale (MacIntyre 1971). Yet, the appeal to cultural specificity presumes that cultures have clear boundaries. As it happens, this is *not* an assumption that most contemporary interpretivists would feel comfortable in making. Hence, the enduring problem of abstraction. If cultures are now global, does that mean that we can (must?) move to a global scale?

A seventh issue is closely related. To what extent does interpretivism allow one to generalize about the world (in either a causal or descriptive vein)? Interpretivism is usually

regarded as a particularizing art. However, it is important to emphasize that this matter, like all judgments of size, is relative. Thus, the question is not whether to generalize, but *how much* to generalize. Indeed, relative to post-modernist/post-structuralist work (Clifford 1988; Rosenau 1992), interpretivists are unabashed generalizers. Yet, against the backdrop of mainstream social science interpretivists usually find themselves on the particularistic end of the spectrum. They tend to emphasize the shortcomings of 'grand' theory, the extent to which local practices resist generalization, the particularity of context, the contingency of human action (see essay by Mark Bevir in this symposium). The very notion of 'context,' an important term in the interpretivist lexicon, suggests a smaller setting than is usual for the nomothetically-inclined social sciences. Local knowledge is prized; general knowledge distrusted.

Quite obviously, if grand generalizations are wrong then they are wrong and should simply be abandoned. This is, arguably, a question of fact. However, it seems more likely that we are facing what one might call a question of academic aesthetics rather than a question of ontological truth. Interpretivists do not deny the universal features of human cognition, geography, and 'institutions'; they feel strongly, however, that this is not where the action is. Non-interpretivists feel just as strongly that their job is to abstract from the particular; that the really interesting (theoretically fruitful) facts are those which are common to a number of disparate settings. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that one is at the horns of a particularly irresolvable dilemma about what sort of truths are useful truths. Should we aim to explain a great deal about a little bit, or a little bit about a great deal? Each, one might say, offers a simplification of reality, but these two approaches – the 'splitting' and 'lumping' – simplify in quite different ways.⁵ This point is nicely underscored in Dessler's essay (below).

An eighth issue is even harder to pin down, but deserves vetting anyway. Is interpretivism a left-wing, or 'critical,' method? There is a general sense that interpretivists occupy the left wing of the contemporary social sciences. This was not always the case; certainly it was not so in the time of Dilthey, when science was still very much on the side of Progress and Progress was still on socialism's side. We should recall that Marxism still carried scientific credentials in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Otto Neurath, a leading member of the Vienna Circle (whose members came to be referred to as Logical Positivists), was a Marxist sympathizer and, according to Gillies (1993: 24), was "in charge of central planning in the temporary Spartacist government set up in Bavaria after the first world war." Other members of the Vienna Circle also leaned toward the Left in the interwar years.

However, by the end of the twentieth century, with the onset of the Cold war, the upheavals of the 1960s, and the apparent demise of communism as a progressive ideology, science changed sides, beginning to look more and more like a handmaiden of the establishment. I do not wish to imply, therefore, that an interpretivist method conditions a critical or left-wing attitude toward the mainstream. Evidently, the relationship between method and substance changes over time and

may yet change again. Nor do I wish to suggest that the practice of an interpretivist method, by itself, inclines one to a critical opinion vis-à-vis the status quo. One can be a left-wing interpretivist as well as a right-wing interpretivist. It seems more likely that the association between interpretivism and radicalism flows from a more general feature of late-twentieth century academics in the US (and perhaps elsewhere): those in the humanities are more left-wing than those in the 'hard' sciences (Ladd and Lipset 1975). The fact is worth mentioning only because it is my impression that political/ideological issues lie just below the surface of many debates between interpretivism and its (right-wing?) twin, positivism.

Ninth, there are set of questions pertaining to interpretivism's proper place in contemporary political science (or social science more generally), an issue addressed by all the participants in this symposium (at least implicitly). Is interpretivism a distinctive way of doing business, as implied by Adcock and Bevir and argued strongly by Yanow, or is it better understood as indicating an important element of *all* (or most) social-scientific work, as argued by Laitin? If the former, should we think of interpretivism as a complement to other ('positivist') methods, as Stoker and Dessler suggest, or an opponent? Do interpretivist studies cumulate with non-interpretivist work? Or are they – to take the most radical view – incommensurable? If the latter, how might we adjudicate between studies of the same general subject that are interpretivist and non-interpretivist (or is it, essentially, a non-rational leap of faith)? Are interpretivist studies 'better' than non-interpretivist studies? Do we need more or less interpretivism, or are the proportions, at present, just about right?

Evidently, to claim that interpretivist work is valuable and important and deserving of an honored place in the social science universe is not to say that all other sorts of work should cease to exist. (I anticipate that few interpretivists would take this position.) My hunch is that much of the agonized debate over interpretivism – as with the equally agonized debate over rational choice – may be understood as a matter of achieving a proper proportion, and a mutually complementary interplay, among diverse research approaches. This observation does not resolve methodological debate; indeed, it invites debate (for how else are we to sort out the proportions?). However, it does put the resulting debate into a more hopeful, and more practical, frame.

Finally, there are ongoing and seemingly irresolvable questions about how to define 'interpretivism.' We return, thus, to the opening topic of this short essay. I raise the definitional question again at this juncture only to remind readers that much of what has been said is contingent upon a certain definition of what interpretivism is. Indeed, in circulating early drafts of this essay I was struck by how often I received the response that, while true of some interpretivists, what I had to say was not true of others.⁶ I am quite sure that this is indeed the case.

Perhaps this is the proper point to end this initial foray into a complex and important subject, and to open the floor to other interpretations of interpretivism.

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Endnotes

¹I am grateful for feedback on various early drafts of this essay from Robert Adcock, Mark Bevir, David Dessler, David Laitin and Dvora Yanow. It has greatly benefited from their careful, and not uncritical, attention.

²I understand Laitin's essay to be arguing in a prescriptive mode; this is what we *should* be defining as interpretivism, he seems to be arguing. Here, I shall approach the subject from the perspective of normal usage. Interpretivism is a) what people say it is and b) what so-called interpretivists do.

³For useful compendiums, see Gibbons (1987), Natanson (1962), and Rabinow and Sullivan (1979).

⁴Sometimes, this issue is framed in terms of a dichotomy between explanation and understanding, as Adcock notes. However, since interpretivists do not seem to equate the former with causal argument and the latter with arguments of a descriptive sort, these terms are not helpful.

⁵A more complicated methodological issue beckons. While interpretivists generally present the particularizing move as the safer move, since it does not presume cross-cultural equivalences, it is important to note that particularizing statements also – by implication – generalize. To say, for example, that Germany is fascist is to imply that either that a) other countries are not fascist or b) that they are. Either (a) nor (b) is always implied; otherwise, the proposition about German fascism (and indeed, the very meaning of fascism) is nonsensical. In this limited sense, particularistic statements are also general statements.

⁶In this respect, the debate over interpretivism reiterates a persistent feature of the ongoing debate over rational choice. As the reader may recall, Don Green and Ian Shapiro (1994) issued a widely read and sharply critical evaluation of work in this genre nearly a decade ago. This was followed by a series of defenses and counter-attacks, many of which tried to show that Green and Shapiro's defi-

inition of rational choice was narrow and un-representative (Cox 1999). Again, much seemed to hinge on matters of definition.

Interpretation

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If we mean by an interpretation a rendering of an ambiguous input into a clear but partial output [or as the OED puts it, "expound the meaning of... something abstruse...to render meanings...clear and explicit"], then all social scientists are interpretivists.¹ Those in the social sciences who divide the methodological universe into interpretivists and (say) positivists are creating what Dewey has called an "untenable dualism." It would be like, as Pitkin has ironically observed in a related context, dividing up the world into herrings and fruits.² It can be done, but with little profit for understanding the world.

Interpretation involves a mix between art and logic. Ambiguous inputs (for example, a year of *New York Times* articles) lend themselves to a near infinity of partial meanings. Seeing something original, a pattern that has yet been seen before, involves artistry. However, seeing if the pattern is real, and not merely like one of Hamlet's interpretations of a cloud formation that Polonius accepts wholeheartedly (though a bit obsequiously), requires a set of diagnostic tests that are ruled by logic.

All science entails both the artistic and logical elements of interpretation, though there is no standard sequence, as these are two interactive processes. The artistic element is essentially theory, in Sheldon Wolin's sense of an encompassing vision.³ The logical element requires a set of diagnostics. Interpreters of data want to know if the general principle that lies behind their interpretation is valid for a range of cases beyond the case at hand. The more violations – or as Thomas Kuhn calls them, anomalies – the less confidence one would have in the interpretation.⁴ Interpreters will also want to know whether the logical implications of their vision are valid. Deriving observable implications of a vision and seeing whether they are valid is a standard tool of interpretation, whether performed by self-designated interpretivists or positivists.

To demonstrate the proposition of the universality of the two elements of the interpretive act, I draw on the iconic classic of political interpretation (Karl Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*) and of sociological positivism (Emile Durkheim's *Suicide*). Marx's journalistic essay exemplifies the best in theoretically based narrative. The sardonic irony that pervades every section makes this essay gripping, the highest form of theoretically guided narrative. But the attention to historical detail, the weaving of a coherent story linked to larger historical forces, and the attention to apparent anomalies, make