P04 / ROOM B3_Author-Meets-Critics: Doing Interpretive Research. Learning and Teaching Imagination in Social Research

Topic : POLICY DISCOURSE, CRITICAL POLICY RESEARCH

Chair : Koen Bartels (University of Birmingham)

Second Chair : Hendrik Wagenaar (University of Vienna)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This panel will discuss an important advance in interpretive policy analysis and the social sciences. Using an Author-Meets-Critics format, three ‘critics’ will offer their perspective on the new book ‘Doing Interpretive Research. Learning and Teaching Imagination in Social Research’. The authors, Koen Bartels and Hendrik Wagenaar, will share their reflections on the critics’ comments and invite the audience to participate in the discussion. The aim of the panel is to introduce a radically new approach to how we learn and teach methods and bridge methodological divides for the sake of more imaginative and impactful research.

The book is based on experiential and pragmatist learning theories. It departs from the thesis by the political scientists Mark Bevir and Jason Blakely that interpretation is an explanatory logic and form of inquiry that is at the root of all social science research, including quantitative research. In learning and teaching interpretive social research, the authors take the key maxim of experiential learning theory, that learning involves the whole person, seriously. It not only places the student’s prior experiences center stage, but also the student’s emotions. The book draws on psychoanalysis and on Nussbaum’s theories of emotions. The book shows that negative emotions can block effective learning. Using extended empirical examples from the authors’ own experiences with research, teaching and supervision, it shows how learning to use open-ended heuristics instead of methods is an effective method to deal with negative emotions and acknowledge the researcher’s prior life experiences. This approach is embedded in the pragmatist conception of the research process as problem solving in which all human faculties play a role.

The purpose of the book is to guide social researchers and instructors in better understanding and improving the experience of doing interpretive research. It demonstrates how emotions can be leveraged in the learning process to uncover surprising new insights about social reality and unlock social researchers’ imaginations. The panel discussion will enable practising interpretive researchers, those drawn to but confused by it, and those who see little relevance of it to their research practice, to gain new insight into how learning and teaching interpretation will lead to more enjoyable, productive, and imaginative research.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The panel will include three critics with leading expertise in learning and teaching interpretive research in diverse contexts.

Critics:

Severine van Bommel (School of Agriculture and Food Sustainability, University of Queensland) conducts interpretive research to support experts in communicating, collaborating and learning with farmers and communities. She is dedicated to mentoring early career researchers interested in interpretive methods and fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange in the field.

Pobsook Chamchong (School of Public Policy, Chiang Mai University) takes an interpretive approach to policy design to promote inclusion, innovation, and collaboration. She is a key contributor to the development of public policy research and teaching in Thailand.

Genevieve Fuji Johnson (Department of Political Science, Simon Fraser University) draws on feminist theory and interpretivism to promote solidaristic scholarship serving the justice struggles of racialized and minoritized communities. She studies and teaches on the governance of sex work and discriminatory practices and policies within academia centers.

Colette Einfeld is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the College of Asia and Pacific at the Australian

National University. Her research focusses on knowledge, evidence, and empathy in policymaking, including the role of diverse epistemologies in policy development in the Global South. Colette also writes on research methodologies, particularly in relation to the practice and experience of interpretive and critical approaches.

Rosana de Freitas Boullosa (Department of Public Policy Management, University of Brasília, Brazil) is a leading scholar in critical policy studies in Brazil. Her feminist and decolonial educational practices fostered social empowerment and intersectional justice by cultivating critical autonomy, social empathy, and democratic engagement, emphasizing the importance of collective learning, deliberation, and co-creation in policy processes.

Authors:

Koen Bartels (Department of Public Administration and Policy, University of Birmingham) conducts interdisciplinary research on relationships between citizens and government. He has developed the field of interpretive policy analysis by improving understanding of policy practice, relationality, action research, deliberative policy analysis, and learning and teaching interpretive research.

Hendrik Wagenaar (Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna; University of Vienna) is a leading scholar in interpretive policy analysis. His books Deliberative Policy Analysis (Cambridge, 2003) and Meaning in Action (Routledge, 2011) are seminal texts and he is widely praised as an experienced teacher and mentor in the field. His research on participatory democracy, sex work, commons, and practice theory offers important advances within and beyond interpretive policy analysis.

Bartels, K.P.R. and Wagenaar, H (2025) Doing Interpretive Research: Learning and Teaching Imagination in Social Research, Oxford: Oxford University Press

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Session 1

RT participant

Severine van Bommel (University of Queensland)

RT participant

Pobsook Chamchong (Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy)

RT participant

Colette Einfeld (Australian National University)

(Virtual) RT participant

Rosana Boullosa (University of Brasilia/Brazil and Enap/Brazil)