P195 / Methodological dilemmas and the craft of interpretation

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Interpretive policy analysis is an established approach. Discourse analysis, policy ethnography, interviewing, narrative analysis and participatory action research are widely used to study how meanings shape policy. Interpretive methodologists have long argued that such research cannot be reduced to strict procedure. Yet research institutions often still expect a linear sequence of steps: methods sections, review criteria and funding templates leave little room for describing the judgements, iterations and bricolage the work involves, such as how to construct a case, when an interpretation is sufficiently grounded, how to handle one's own position in the field, how to move from fieldwork to argument, how to read the literature, and how to defend these choices to reviewers, funders and ethics committees expecting positivist standards.

Yanow and Schwartz-Shea have articulated the logic of interpretive research design and its own criteria of quality, such as reflexivity, transparency and trustworthiness. Others have shown that interpretive policy analysis is itself a practice of meaning-making (Wagenaar; Fischer), and that methodological judgement is a form of practical wisdom (phronesis) that cannot be reduced to rules (Flyvbjerg). Interpretive methodological knowledge is thus largely craft knowledge and its practice, developed through engagement with concrete cases, and this craft is constantly in motion.

Three examples of internal debates, changing political and organisational environments and new technologies illustrate the renewing interpretive policy analysis (cf. van Bommel, 2025). First, poststructural approaches question the fieldwork site as a geographical location and treat interviews as sites where problematisations and subject positions are constituted, while multi-sited research follows people, objects and ideas as meanings travel and are translated. Second, alongside interviews and documents, the researcher's body has become recognised as an instrument for grasping tacit understandings, increasingly mediated by video, digital and online methods. Third, the lone 'I-witness' fieldworker is giving way to more team-based and international collaboration in fieldwork, analysis and writing. Such developments make familiar challenges more complex: building rapport and trust across dispersed sites and within research teams, avoiding flattened representations of actors' experiences, and deciding what counts as data and as a good interpretation, and who decides.

This panel asks: how are interpretive methods enacted in practice, and what methodological and ethical questions does this raise?

The panel builds on the interpretive policy analysis community's methodology workshops, modelled on the master class in music, in which presenters discuss a concrete methodological question with experienced respondents. Comparable formats, include the Methods Café created by Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, which has been a regular part of the American Political Science Association's main programme since 2006 (Funk 2019) and has also featured at International Studies Association and other conferences and at the ECPR and Methods.Net Methods Schools. Each session brings together three or four papers, each presenting methodological questions raised in interpretive research. Two discussants respond and draw out connections across cases, followed by discussion with all attendees. Sessions deliberately combine scholars at different career stages, because methodological dilemmas recur throughout a research career. The panel thus aims to make the evolving judgements of interpretive research explicit, comparable and open to collective scrutiny.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite papers that address a methodological question in interpretive policy analysis. Papers should briefly present the project and its approach, and then focus on a specific methodological or methods problem, choice or dilemma: what was at stake, how did the researcher(s) handle it, and what does it teach us about interpretive policy research?

We welcome papers on any interpretive method or aspect of interpretive methodologies, including but not limited to:

- discourse analysis, frame analysis, narrative analysis;

- argumentative approaches;
- policy ethnography and participant observation;
- interviewing, including elite and expert interviewing;
- action research in its various forms, including participatory action research and community-based participatory research, and transdisciplinary co-production with policy actors;
- visual, digital and online methods.

Cross-cutting themes may include case construction and research design; abductive moving between fieldwork, interpretation and argument; reflexivity and positionality; building rapport and trust across dispersed sites and within research teams; the ethics of representing actors' experiences; quality criteria and the justification of interpretive research to reviewers, funders and ethics committees; and methodological innovation in new policy contexts. We particularly welcome papers that reflect on how changing fieldwork sites, instruments and fieldworkers, including multi-sited, digital and team-based research, reshape familiar methodological and ethical questions.

Both completed projects and works in progress are welcome, provided the paper is clear about the methodological question it seeks to discuss. We welcome submissions from researchers at all career stages, and explicitly invite established scholars to reflect on methodological choices in their own current or past work.

Sessions will be organised by method or theme and will mix career stages, with short presentations followed by discussant responses and an open discussion. Abstracts should state the focus of the research project, the interpretive approach used, and the specific methodological question the author would like to have discussed by the two discussants and those in attendance.