P197 / Researching the politically sensitive: interpretive research on contested policy issues

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Policy research increasingly takes place on politically sensitive terrain. Climate and agricultural transitions, migration, gender, public health and land use are not only contested policy domains; they are also fields in which researchers face polarisation, institutional pressure, online hostility and, in some contexts, democratic backsliding. For interpretive and action researchers these pressures are particularly acute. Their methodologies depend on proximity such as gaining access to policy actors and communities, building trust, co-producing knowledge with participants and making visible the meanings at stake in policy conflicts. The same proximity that makes interpretive research valuable also exposes researchers, participants and partners to political risk. Many of the hardest decisions are taken in the field, often in the moment. We need to decide whether to continue an interview when a participant becomes exposed, how to respond when gatekeepers try to steer the research, what to do when witnessing conflict or intimidation, and when to withdraw because one's own safety is at stake.

The literature offers important starting points. Work on sensitive research (Sieber and Stanley; Lee and Renzetti) has long shown that sensitivity lies in the potential consequences of research for those involved rather than in the topic as such. Interpretive methodologists have emphasised reflexivity, positionality and the co-constitution of knowledge (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea), and scholars of action research in policy analysis have shown how researchers become participants in the processes they study (Bartels and Wittmayer). Work on "ethics in practice" highlights the gap between procedural ethics approval and the ethically important moments researchers encounter in the field (Guillemin and Gillam). Yet these strands rarely meet, and we know surprisingly little about how policy researchers actually navigate political sensitivity from research design through fieldwork to publication, and with what consequences for the knowledge produced.

This panel asks: how do interpretive researchers in public policy deal with political sensitivity, and how does the way they deal with it shape what their research performs?

We explore three issues. First, political sensitivity is not an inherent property of topics but is relational and performed. It emerges in interactions between researchers, participants, institutions and wider political contexts, and shifts over the course of a project. Second, institutional ethics regimes manage sensitivity largely procedurally. This can protect participants, but it can also displace situated ethical judgement, discourage research on contested issues and silence particular voices. Third, the strategies researchers adopt, such as negotiating access, anonymising, reframing findings for different audiences, or keeping distance from or aligning with particular actors, are not merely technical choices but political interventions that shape what knowledge becomes possible and sayable.

By bringing together reflexive, empirically grounded accounts from different policy fields and political contexts, the panel aims to develop a shared methodological vocabulary for politically sensitive policy research. Each session combines paper presentations with an extended response from experienced interpretive and action researchers, so that individual cases become the basis for collective methodological learning.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite papers that reflect, on the basis of concrete empirical research, on the methodological and ethical challenges of conducting interpretive research on politically sensitive policy issues. Papers should not only describe a case but use it to address a methodological question: what happened, how did the researcher(s) respond, and what does this teach us about doing policy research under political pressure?

We particularly welcome papers addressing:

-fieldwork dilemmas: decisions taken in the moment when participants become exposed, gatekeepers seek to steer the research, researchers witness conflict or intimidation, or their own safety is at risk;
-access, trust and positionality when studying contested policies, powerful actors or marginalised

communities;
-the relationship between institutional ethics review and situated ethical judgement in the field;
-risks to participants, partners and researchers themselves, including harassment, legal or political exposure, and self-censorship;
-action research, co-production and participatory approaches in polarised settings, and the dilemmas of taking sides;
-anonymisation, representation, and the publication and uptake of sensitive findings;
-how sensitivity differs across political regimes, policy sectors, and the Global North and South;
-what research on sensitive issues performs politically, and how researchers can account for this.
Papers comparing cases, giving honest accounts of fieldwork that did not go to plan, or reflecting on research that was abandoned, blocked or redesigned, are especially welcome. Papers may draw on discourse analysis, ethnography, interviewing, narrative analysis, participatory and action research, or other interpretive approaches. We welcome contributions from researchers at all career stages and explicitly encourage doctoral and early-career researchers, for whom these dilemmas are often most pressing and least discussed, to submit alongside more senior scholars. Sessions will be organised thematically, with short presentations followed by discussant responses and open discussion. Abstracts should state the focus of the research project, the interpretive approach used, and the specific methodological or ethical dilemma the author would like to have discussed by the discussants and those in attendance.