P139 / Searching for complementarity: Can empiricism and interpretivism collaborate?

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

Chair : Peter Tangney (University of Amsterdam)

Second Chair : Imrat Verhoeven (University of Amsterdam)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

In the last 50 years or so, interpretive policy analysis has established itself as a significant alternative to positivist and/or rationalist policy sciences. Described variously in terms of *post-positivism*, the *Argumentative Turn*, *communicative rationality* and *participatory* or *deliberative policy analysis* (Dryzek 1990; Fischer and Forrester 1991; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003), interpretivist scholarship now constitutes a substantial portion of the policy studies literature. Alongside this burgeoning scholarship, there has been much debate and discussion of the limitations of empiricist policy-analysis in terms of its failure to adequately account for the values and partial perspectives that infuse its methods (Johnson 2005).

More recently, interpretivist and positivist scholars have argued that the divide between interpretivism and empiricism has been exaggerated due to somewhat unfair caricatures on each side (Durnová and Weible 2020). Lasswell's policy sciences, it turns out, was not actually as positivist as had often been assumed, incorporating contingent, critical and reflexive perspectives in its pragmatic orientation to policy analysis (Torgerson 2022). Post-positivist rationalism, it has been proposed, might effectively work in tandem with interpretivism (Weimer 1998). Some argue that we should seek out theory-building and methodological complementarities between traditional empiricism and interpretivism, for instance through side-by-side research, integrative research, mutual learning about research techniques, or joint applied research (Durnová and Weible 2020).

We see potential in searching for such complementarities, and to explore this possibility further. In part, our optimism springs from our perception that, in the past, positivism (i.e. we can find the ‘truth’), rationalism (i.e. we can apply informed reason to choose and implement the ‘best’ policies) and empiricism (i.e. we can enhance policymaking and implementation through the collection and analysis of relevant data) may have been unduly conflated under one positivist umbrella. We suggest that empiricist methods may be under-appreciated in terms of their potential for advancing interpretive policy studies. We also note the increasing use of generative AI (genAI) tools for policy analysis in recent years, and we see potential for methods that can advance both empiricist and interpretivist programs in complementary ways. By focusing on complementarity, this panel seeks to advance our understanding of how interpretivism and empiricism can collaborate.

References

-Dryzek, J.S. 1990. Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy and Political Science. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

-Durnová, A.P., Weible, C.M. 2020. “Tempest in a teapot? Toward new collaborations between mainstream policy process studies and interpretive policy studies”. Policy Sciences, 53: 571-588

-Fischer F. and J. Forester (eds). 1993. The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning, Durham, NC: Duke University Press

-Hajer, M. Wagenaar, H. (eds). 2003. Deliberative Policy Analysis: Understanding Governance in the Network Society. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

-Johnson, G.F. 2005. “Taking Stock: The Normative Foundations of Positivist and Non-Positivist Policy Analysis and Ethical Implications of the Emergent Risk Society”. Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice, 7(2): 137-153

-Torgerson, D. 2024. The Policy Sciences of Harold Lasswell: Contextual Orientation and the Critical Dimension. Edward Elgar Publishing

-Weimer, D.L. 1998. “Policy Analysis and Evidence: A Craft Perspective”. PolicyStudies Journal, 26(1): 114-128

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the complementarity between interpretivism and empiricism, by bringing together theoretical, conceptual, methodological and empirical papers that try to combine these approaches. This exploration may include new possibilities for traditional methods, or develop entirely new hybrid methods that have not been explored significantly to date.

Given this objective, guiding questions for the panel are:

· What methods show potential for better integration between empiricist and interpretivist research goals?

· How can hybrid methods contribute to theory building for both empiricist and interpretivist scholarship?

· How can interpretivism and empiricism be combined to reach empirically richer and more nuanced understandings of policy processes and puzzles?

· What hybrid methods do genAI technologies or other computational methods facilitate that can service both empiricism and interpretivism?

We note some important methodological developments in recent years that appear to have bridged the divide between traditional empiricism and interpretivism, such as interpretive process tracing (e.g. Guzzini 2012). We are also interested in the potential for large-N survey design to better accommodate interpretive analysis. Meanwhile, genAI-powered computational methods like Natural Language Processing and its variants (e.g. Structural Topic Modelling and Named Entity Recognition) suggest new horizons for interpretive research, advancing the possibilities for large-N qualitative analysis. At the same time, the massive data collection and data synthesis potential of genAI tools appear to be on the brink of revolutionizing traditional approaches to empiricist policy science. We are therefore particularly enthusiastic to explore the possibility of quantitative or computational methods that facilitate both methodologies simultaneously. Nonetheless, this call is open to all methodological approaches that seek complementarity between empiricism and interpretivism. We are also interested to receive papers that explore, conceptually or theoretically, the complementarities between these approaches.

References:

-Guzzini, S. 2012. “Social mechanisms as micro-dynamics in constructivist analysis”. In: Guzzini, S. (ed) (2019) *The Diffusion of Power in Global Governance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan