

You can't just tell it like it is: Or, why description is always an exercise in theory.

J. Samuel Barkin

University of Massachusetts Boston

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*Just Telling Like It Is – 2.0*

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Note: Apologies for the absence of footnotes. Time management issues...

This workshop on descriptive research is subtitled *Just telling it like it is*. This implies that there's an identifiable *is* that we can tell about through description. This memo argues that we can't do that. Not because description isn't critically important to political science. It is. And not because there aren't better or worse descriptions, ways of doing description that are more or less methodologically sound or more or less effective in helping us to understand the world. Rather, it's a cautionary note to remind us that, however descriptive a narrative, it is never *only* description. It is always also an expression of theory.

The social world is infinitely complex. Social scientific description makes sense of the world by simplifying it in some way and for some purpose. Both the content and the purpose of that simplification are theory-driven; description is as such *inescapably* an application of theory. "Telling it like it is" implies that there is a way that it "is," a truth that is more singular or more comprehensive than other tellings. This is in a way akin to claims by positivists that their science is objective, and therefore truer science than that of interpretivists. But there are many true stories to be told about the thing to be described, and many true ways to conceptualize what that thing is in the first place.

To say that description is always an expression of theory begs the question of what I mean by theory in this context. There is no clear answer; the relationship between theory and description

depends on the epistemological context within which a piece of research is located. Nor is there a specific answer within any given epistemological context. One can think of different kinds of theory, such as causal and normative theory, and furthermore both the meaning of and the relationship between these concepts varies across epistemological contexts (note that this is not a claim that ‘causal’ and ‘normative’ are two privileged categories of theory; rather, I use them in the hope that they are heuristically useful in this context).

The middle of this memo endeavors to illustrate this claim both that description is always theory-laden and that the relationship between theory and description varies by epistemological setting by looking at the relationship briefly in the context of three epistemological settings (note that these are examples; I’m not making any claims about how best to categorize social science epistemologies). The first of these settings is the sort of positivist hypothesis-testing that most of the participants in this conference likely think of as the thing that this workshop is organized in opposition to. Making the connection between theory and description is straightforward in this epistemological context because theory understood as causal logic defines the categories that description needs to fit into, whether those categories are described quantitatively or narratively. Normative theory is in principle separate from causal theory in this epistemological setting, informing choice of topic but not choice of causal theory to be tested. In positivism narrowly defined, then, descriptive categories themselves are defined by the causal theory to be tested, but should not be defined by normative theory. Note that this set of relationships holds not only for quantitative correlation analysis but also to qualitative comparative case studies, to the extent that the purpose of the comparison is hypothesis testing.

The second epistemological setting is studies grounded in Weberian interpretivism. In this setting description is intended not to test general hypotheses about relationships, but to explain, to make sense of, specific cases. The connection between theory and description here is more complicated and nuanced than in the positivist setting, but the two remain no more separable. The exercise in sense-making requires reducing the complexity of the case to a comprehensible narrative, a tellable story. Hypotheses are not isolated prior to empirical research, but this does not mean that the researcher can approach the case with a completely open mind. The researcher comes to the project with ideas about what to look for, what is important, and those ideas help to

define what the researcher will find. Nor is the result of the study a telling of it like it is; in this epistemological setting research is not truth-telling, it is sense-making, which is a fundamentally different epistemological claim. Weber argues that exercises in causal theory (a different form of causal theory than that practiced by positivists, but causal theory nonetheless) should be separated as much as possible from the normative commitments of the researcher, but that this separation can never be complete.

This stance, that the ethical researcher should endeavor to keep normative commitments distinct from causal claims, is a key point of difference between Weber and practitioners of the third epistemological setting, which encompasses many forms of critical theory. In this setting, normative theory both cannot and should not be separated from causal theory. Theorizing the world not only explains the world, it participates in making it. Theorizing in this epistemological setting is fundamental to the descriptive process, because the description is necessarily, and purposefully, theory-laden. Needless to say, not only are causal and normative theory not in practice less separable in this setting, but the researcher in principle is not trying to be value-neutral.

In short, then, the relationship between theory and description varies radically across epistemological settings (as does the meaning of the terms themselves). But in none of these settings is the process of description intellectually or methodologically prior to theory. In the more interpretive ends of the social sciences one way of recognizing the inseparability of our expectations of how the world works from our descriptions of it is found in discussions of positionality. To the extent that discussions of researcher positionality are meaningful, they are based on the recognition that how we expect the world to work affects how we observe it to work. We cannot tell it like it is; we can only tell it like it is to us.

Description is of course a core component of any social scientific undertaking. But it is never theory-neutral, and creating a separate category of “descriptive” work is potentially both misleading and counterproductive. Misleading in that it implies that there is social scientific work that is not subject to rules of good descriptive work at some point in its research design. Counterproductive in that it says to scholars who do not think of themselves themselves as

descriptivists that they do not need to pay attention to those rules. Being clear, both to ourselves and our interlocutors, about the theoretical assumptions underlying, the normative claims informing, and the epistemological role motivating our descriptions is fundamental to both an honest and an effective social science. Neither description nor theory-making are separate or separable categories of social scientific research. Being conscious of and reflective about the theory we bring to our descriptions, rather than telling ourselves that our descriptions are theory-neutral, is key to epistemologically sound research.