

## Multilevel Description and Strategic Sites. Memo for Descriptive Research Workshop

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Description has been underdiscussed in methodology writing in political science. Researchers in the field will benefit from explicit and structured discussion around description because all research engages in it to some degree. Discussion around the tools of descriptive research is fundamental. If there are tools that make it more immediately relevant to other types of researchers in political science, this will also be important. In the following memo I will elaborate two tools which I use in my own research, the strategic site (Merton 1987), and multilevel description, making the case for how their use can make description-heavy research, such as ethnography, more immediately relevant for political scientists.

### *Multilevel description and the ladder of description*

Descriptive work has a particular flexibility in producing knowledge about different scales of politics. Indeed, political scientists are interested in very different scales of politics, from international relations to national-level politics and policy, to the regional, local, or even micro-level dynamics. Literature on numerous topics, such as civil wars, political economy, and immigration show the multilevel production of knowledge that already exists. But for description-heavy research, such as ethnography, multilevel description can be a useful tool to make it more immediately relevant for other political scientists who may be interested only in a different level of politics.

Multilevel description as a tool is only the formalization and conceptualization of a practice with which political science already engages, but which has not yet (to the author's knowledge) been formalized or conceptualized explicitly. Once conceptualized and discussed more explicitly, the strengths of moving through descriptive levels of politics will also become clearer.

Giovani Sartori's (1970) classic metaphor of the ladder of abstraction can serve as a useful analogy to think about how to talk about the use of multilevel description. In Sartori's argument, researchers can move up or down in abstraction, which is to say that the concept they use can be more general (up) or specific (down). I propose that we use a *ladder of description* where going up refers to descriptions at a different, "higher" level of politics and descending means a "lower" level. The height of the levels is determined by the scale of the political arrangements/structures and processes under study. By level, I do not intend to convey any normative implication. A higher level is not a better or more adequate level of analysis. In fact, most of the research that I have conducted individually or with coauthors has begun at a "low" level as it is based on ethnography. The notion of levels is simply intended to formulate this research tool. Furthermore, the levels of this ladder of description would need to be set according to theoretical concerns, empirical work, and, hopefully, collaboration among scholars who do research in the same area.

An example for my own research may be illustrative. I study immigration documentation and undocumented in the United States and Colombia. I combine ethnographic research with policy-process analysis. I follow, hang out, and interview both documented and undocumented immigrants in New York City and in Bogota, Colombia. I also conduct research into the policy process in the US whereby there is no avenue for documentation for the circa 11 million undocumented immigrants and in Colombia where nearly all 2.5 million Venezuelan immigrants have access to a residence and work permit and relief from deportation.

Helping Teresa, a Venezuelan immigrant who arrived in Colombia in 2016, in the kitchen of her small apartment in a grey Bogotá day, I hear about how she and her family have had multiple interactions with the Colombian police that she describes as “calm” and have actually called the cops on some occasions when a neighbor’s have had unreasonably loud music, or they have witnessed something that merited police attention. I asked if they were ever scared to call or encounter the police; “Why should we?” was the answer. This small, localized piece of information gains much greater significance when the description of the ethnographic episode is accompanied by a move up to describe Bogotá’s policies to provide services for Venezuelan immigrants, including a campaign to gain their trust. We can move up once more and describe the policy of documenting virtually all Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia. And we can move up once again to describe how Colombia has documented virtually all immigrants in its borders while the US, and many other traditional destination states, have become less inclusive of irregular immigrants.

Ethnographic, and other description-heavy research becomes more immediately relevant to political science when it has the capacity to “move up” in the scale of research and then “move down” back into microprocesses. In fact, many political ethnographers already do this, without a formalized concept of distinct levels of description. Hence, Cramer’s (2016) ethnographic work on rural resentment becomes more obviously relevant as she moves up to place it in the context of Wisconsin politics and the rise of Walker. Timothy Pachirat’s (2013) ethnography of an industrial slaughterhouse becomes more explicitly relevant for political science when it is accompanied by a description of gag laws passed by state legislatures, showing parallel processes of opaqueness at the micro and at the state level.

A final issue that multilevel description brings to the fore is what the connection between the different levels are. Is there a casual link? A cognitive among research subjects? Is it simply a temporal or geographic relation between one process and the other? This will depend on specific research and the links may be only a matter for speculation but, in addition to moving across levels, descriptive research may find it productive to provide a rationale about how the processes or arrangements described relate to each other.

Unlike Sartori’s ladder of abstraction that was meant to provide an ideal “height” from which to form a concept. The ladder of description should be a tool that formalizes and makes explicit—and therefore reinforces—a virtue of descriptive research which is the capacity to move up and down scales of politics in multiple ways and directions. My objective is not to suggest that there is an ideal height for description nor an ideal direction for it to move in.

Rather, it is a plea to conceptualize this virtue of descriptive research and a suggestion that others engaged in it more explicitly and thoroughly.

### *The strategic site*

Strategic sites are situations, units of analysis, or other objects of description where particular processes of interest are most transparent and, therefore, most easily observed and recorded (Merton 1987). (Merton relates how the translucent lungs of frogs served as a strategic site for anatomists eager to learn about gas exchange in human anatomy.) It requires the researcher to state what the “area of ignorance” is which the site will clarify and make an explicit claim about what problem or issue studying the site meticulously may likely illuminate. Originally developed by sociologist Robert Merton, the strategic site is used by sociologists frequently as both a tool for research design and a post-research framing device which helps underscore the contribution of research.

Merton’s process for selecting research material can aid to decide on a field site for the ethnographer before beginning fieldwork, and it can also help in providing an explanation and rationale for the selection or discovery of a particular site, strengthening the arguments for research that does not strive for generalizability of results as their main goal. This is to say, it is a tool that helps researchers argue why the description of a particular site is relevant to a larger problem and, therefore, a larger audience. It also could provide a common language for ethnographers that makes their work, as Simmons and Smith (2019) have put it, more “legible” to non-ethnographers.

For the ethnographer, this may represent a trade-off: the ethnography becomes, in the view of some, perhaps “reduced” to being about a theoretical question or a particular problem rather than about the subject of the ethnography itself. Also, ambiguity and room for interpretation—which is celebrated by many ethnographers—is diminished in favor of relating the ethnography to a specific class of problems. However, the upside is that it provides a language that does not constrain ethnography (like the language of dependent variable, independent variables does) but which does allow for easier communication and translation across methodologies.

I will use an example from Robert C. Smith and my work to illustrate. Smith has a long-term multisited ethnographic project studying the effects of lacking or gaining legal status among immigrants in New York State, of which I am a part. Through extensive interviews and ethnographic observation, researchers on this project, while studying forms of exclusion for undocumented immigrants and their families, encountered time and again stories about driving while undocumented in New York State. Study participants kept going back to the difficulties they faced moving around outside of New York City and ethnographic observation in field sites often included tense and ethnographically dense scenarios around a seemingly trivial activity: getting to work, taking kids to school, shopping for groceries.

Inductively, it emerged that driving was, for undocumented immigrants and their mixed-status families, a point of enormous tension and exclusion, especially before the passage of the Greenlight Law in NY State. Driving therefore emerged in the as a strategic site to study immigrant exclusion. While many scholars tend to define strategic sites as actual physical

locations, we suggest that the *process* and the *experience* of driving can be considered a strategic site. It emerged as a particularly relevant site for it is the activity most likely to lead to contact with the police and, therefore deportation and family separation for the undocumented (Smith et al. 2021; Smith and Besserer Rayas in process). This strategic site was hidden in plain sight, so to speak. Although mentioned by prominent scholars of immigration exclusion (Garcia 2019; Enriquez 2015; Armenta 2018), it has yet to be explored as a site worthy of research in its own right and is mentioned only tangentially.

We find that, by taking driving as a strategic site, several phenomena rise to the surface. The first is the balkanization of rules and institutions that exclude or include immigrants and their families—localities in New York State vary greatly in terms of police scrutiny of immigrants. The second is the substitution of legal criteria for racialized ones—immigrants have repeatedly relayed how they are profiled while driving and stories have emerged of being stopped for “looking Mexican” as well as subsequent reactions by immigrants to avoid attention due to their ethnicity. The third one is the exclusion of immigrants from key American institutions which hampers social mobility and integration. The fourth is fear, trauma, and distrust, as central emotions in the immigrant household when dealing with authorities. The fifth is a spillover or transmission of exclusion from immigrant parents to immigrant or US-citizen children. By describing the experience of driving while undocumented in a rich and complex fashion, several dynamics around immigrant exclusion become transparent.

## **Conclusion**

A renewed focus on description as both a means for other types of political science research and as an end to itself is cause for celebration. It also creates some bafflement: why has the discipline focused relatively scant attention to description thus far? Perhaps a reason for this is that description has not been thought of as a scientific end in itself. Political science could, as Bernstein and colleagues (2000) have argued, use evolutionary biology as a natural science to emulate. Much of evolutionary biology’s core research consists in detailed descriptions of specimen and how they relate to other specimen, environmental conditions, and the evolutionary processes itself.

The two modest proposals for descriptive research tools, multilevel description and strategic sites, may also contribute to making descriptive work more clearly relevant to other political scientists. Although I have focused on ethnographic research, the tools are likely to be useful beyond ethnography.

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