

Conceptualizing Hidden Power through Generative Description

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Descriptive Research Workshop

Preliminary Memo – Please do not cite or circulate without permission.

University of Massachusetts, Boston

October 28, 2022

Proposal

Description close to the ground can provide the foundation for developing new social scientific concepts based on hidden power relationships and sources of inequality. This preliminary memo aims to show 1) why description is valuable in itself for making visible what otherwise is difficult to see in politics and 2) how it can also be productive for both descriptive and causal research moving forward.

Descriptive work is useful in data-poor environments, such as authoritarian regimes that have become less accessible. The two aforementioned contributions of description to social science grow out of my own research experience and fieldwork for writing my book *Beyond Coercion: The Political Logic of Inequality in China* (under contract with Cambridge University Press and part of the Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute series). My book advances an original theory and concept of *political atomization* about how the Chinese state maintains social control and structural inequality. It answers why most migrant workers still lack access to urban public services despite national directives to incorporate them into cities, reported worker shortages, and ongoing labor unrest and how policies said to expand workers' rights end up undermining their claims to benefits owed to them. I argue that local governments provide public services for migrants using a process of political atomization that enables the state to exercise

control beyond coercion by atomizing those who might otherwise mobilize against it, but this can eventually be destabilizing for the regime.

Analysis of data collected through qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations, uncovers political dynamics that may not otherwise be fully captured and which require deep area studies knowledge and a degree of embeddedness to understand. The experience of historically marginalized and vulnerable groups becomes recognized while our knowledge about politics deepens. The lived experience and power dynamics of relationships can be difficult to see without description, and that which is challenging to see requires conceptualization before operationalization and measurement can begin for explaining variation and making causal inferences.

Building on this visibility, descriptive work has a productive goal of generating research questions that come out of the lived experience of politics on the ground. My original concept and theory of *political atomization* showcase the relationship between the state and migrant workers in China and how structures of inequality facilitate social control. But when I share my work, I am often struck by the connections that people make to the same phenomena that are happening but which remain undertheorized or poorly understood in countries with different regime types (i.e., democracies) and levels of development than China. As I reframe a comparative article to understand inequality elsewhere, the mechanisms and processes remain similar while the scope conditions become refined. This generated research would not exist without the early descriptive work from the beginning stages of my boots-on-the-ground fieldwork scattered across different regions of the country and settings ranging from construction sites to hospital exam rooms to factory dorms. Good description is generative and plants seedlings for new research questions for future pursuit.

Questions for Brainstorming

On Being Systematic

1. How can scholars more systematically first identify and then conceptualize political phenomena that are less visible?
2. Building on extant literature on conceptualization, how do we operationalize descriptive research to travel across cases?

On Developing Generative Research

3. How can scholars build new concepts and theories to maximize their generative potential? Are there, for example, criteria that should be standardized?
4. What trade-offs exist between generative descriptive research and other kinds of research? Under what conditions would generative descriptive research be particularly advantageous?
5. Does descriptive research have to be generative to be valuable or useful? Why?
6. What is the relationship between descriptive and causal research questions? Can each form be generative for the other?

On Increasing Visibility

7. The COVID-19 pandemic has limited fieldwork access for many comparative political scientists and other researchers. What can be done practically to access hidden sources of power using methods besides ethnography and semi-structured interviews in the field?

8. How can we responsibly balance the different trade-offs of studying (in)visibility around power that often involves vulnerable and historically marginalized people?