

## Description and Interpretation in Political Science

Catriona Standfield, Worcester State University<sup>1</sup>

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The turn toward descriptive research in political science is a response to the excesses of technically sophisticated causal identification strategies that rest on shaky conceptual or empirical grounds. This response is warranted, but there is a risk of overlooking the role that description already plays in interpretive political science, thereby failing to benefit from its contributions. Harnessing description to causal inference is only a small slice of what description can achieve. For interpretive scholars, description is, in itself, a scientific endeavor. This memo sketches out why interpretive and qualitative methods should not be conflated as we explore the possibilities of descriptive political science, the sociological challenges to description in the discipline, standards of rigor in interpretive research, and why it is necessary for political scientists to be able to “code-switch” between positivist and interpretive standards for description (and for social-scientific research more broadly). As a feminist International Relations scholar, many of my examples will be drawn from debates within my sub-fields on method and methodology. My geographic focus is on political science in the United States as it is both the paradigmatic example of these problems and influential in setting disciplinary boundaries globally.

### *Defining description*

The definition of description used in discussions about its value in political science present it as a residual category of causal arguments, where causality is defined in positivist terms.<sup>2</sup> Gerring (2012) aims to defend “mere” description and to establish its importance separately from causal inference. However, he proceeds from positivist presuppositions. This means that Gerring ends up presenting the central problem of description as one of falsifiability. In his estimation, description is far more subjective than causal analysis, which can lead to the generation of many different, unfalsifiable descriptions of the same phenomenon. Finally, Gerring (2012, 746) concedes that:

Good description is closely hinged to normative judgements about the world [and] it is difficult to separate the concepts that govern theoretically driven description...from these normative concerns. It follows that a re-engagement with description may also involve a re-engagement with the normative underpinnings of political science, a topic often swept under the rug in causal analyses.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant professor, Department of History and Political Science. Email: [cstandfield@worcester.edu](mailto:cstandfield@worcester.edu)

<sup>2</sup> I am using “positivist” as shorthand for a range of approaches to scientific inquiry that assume a separation between the researcher’s mind and the world, thereby further assuming the possibility of objective observation. As a community of practice, the work of (neo-)positivists in political science is to falsify hypotheses against observational or experimental data in a process that should culminate in law-like generalizations about the social/political world (Jackson 2017, 233).

At this point, positivist presuppositions are of little help. We have waded into the murky waters of meaning-making. Luckily, interpretive social scientists have been thinking about these problems for well over a century and have not shoved normative concerns under the rug. Interpretive scholars take description seriously as a scientific endeavor and also foreground the normative and subjective elements of knowledge production.

Simply put, description *is* interpretation. To describe is to constitute the social world by imposing theoretical categories upon it. This is central to interpretivism but has also long been recognized as a problem of conceptualization by positivists, too (Jackson 2017, 236). The unwieldiness of description that Gerring describes is part and parcel of an interpretive research process that foregrounds the constitutive nature of language and practice, as I discuss below. Moreover, unlike in positivist political science, there is not a bright line between description and explanation (which, as Gerring shows, is actually blurrier than often thought, anyway): description, especially of how humans make meaning and how social orders are maintained, helps to explain politics. In Geertz's (1973, 310-323) formulation, one cannot explain the difference between a wink and a twitch without a "thick description" of the cultural context surrounding the act. In IR, interpretive explanations of politics often focus on describing conditions of possibility, relations of mutual constitution, and historical and social contingency. They describe how the structural position of agents shape possibilities for action, or how language makes certain policy choices (un-)thinkable. This means that description is not considered as a research task that has to be completed prior to the ultimate goal of explanation – description and explanation go hand-in-hand. Interpretive approaches, therefore, offer a wealth of tools for conducting and evaluating description.

### *Interpretive approaches*

Interpretive scholarship is "science", in that it is "empirical inquiry designed to produce knowledge" (Jackson 2011, 19). However, it is conducted and evaluated according to standards that have developed within a distinct community of practice. Positivist scientific practices are similarly historical, situated, and co-produced, although they are misrecognized as curiously monolithic and objective in political science methods debates. Broadly, interpretive political science analyzes how humans make individual and collective meaning of their worlds. Unlike positivist science, in which it is assumed that a scientist can render a true and objective representation of the world, interpretation "denaturalizes dominant explanations" to study the political power of truth claims, while also implicating the researcher in these processes (Lynch 2013, 14). Several features characterize interpretive IR research: mind-world monism (Jackson 2011), notions of causality that encompass mutual constitution and contingency, a focus on the importance of language in constructing rather than simply representing reality, a recognition of the researcher's positionality and reflection on how this shapes the research process, and a centering of power relations in the research process and phenomena under study (Lynch 2013, 22-23).

"Interpretive" is not equal to "qualitative". The usual qualitative/quantitative divide that frames debates over method in political science is both misleading and unhelpful. The desire of the Perestroika statement was to make more room for qualitative work in a discipline that heavily favors quantitative methods and rational-choice frameworks. The subsequent growth in the diversity of methods has masked the fact that epistemological diversity – that is, various approaches to answering the question of "how do we know what we know?" – lags behind. The

use of “qualitative” in political science has come to mean “small-N studies that apply large-N tools” (Yanow 2003, 10), in contradistinction to large-N statistical analyses (KKV’s imposition of positivist causal analysis on qualitative methods is emblematic). This has delinked qualitative inquiry from the interpretive presuppositions that informed the development of methods like ethnography or discourse analysis. Mainstream qualitative methods have gained status and popularity by conforming to positivist modes of inquiry and standards of validity, while interpretive qualitative methodologies have remained marginal.

In addition to conflating qualitative methods with positivist approaches, the methods discussion in Political Science overlooks the fact that interpretation does not preclude the collection and use of quantitative data. Barkin and Sjoberg (2017) argue that the associations of quantitative/positivist and qualitative/interpretive have conflated method with methodology – the former referring to specific techniques and the latter capturing the theoretical connections between technique, ontology, and epistemology. They contend that statistical, mathematical, and computational methods can all be used in an interpretive research design. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu was trained in and used both ethnographic and statistical methods in his sociological studies (e.g., Bourdieu 2010). From my own sub-field, feminist scholars have used descriptive quantitative data to answer the question, “Where are the women?” (Enloe 2014). For example, describing the gendered distribution of labor in an institution such as diplomacy explains how ambassadorial status is conditioned by gender (Towns and Niklasson 2017). Unfortunately, the continued elision of interpretive/qualitative restricts the methods toolbox available to researchers. Part of taking description seriously should be to move away from technique-driven methodology so that the full range of methods are available to scholars in describing political phenomena.

### *Interpretive standards*

Descriptive research can be evaluated by many of the same standards that are used to evaluate interpretive research. Contrary to the notion that interpretivism rejects all truth claims, there are standards for deciding between interpretations. For example, the demythologizing project of decolonial IR critiques Eurocentric narratives of IR by arguing that they are incomplete, inaccurate, and inconsistent (Sabaratnam 2011). They do not argue that both Eurocentric and decolonial accounts are equally true. Interpretation is socially situated, meaning that it appeals to communal standards for evidence and reasoning, as well as agreed-upon facts. An interpretation that is “accurate, comprehensive, and consistent” and that generates new and interesting propositions is preferable (Bevir and Rhodes 2015, 11). Interpretive political scientists generally want to see arguments that are internally consistent and well supported by the evidence. Interpretive approaches have produced new narratives of IR that account for race, coloniality, gender, and heteronormativity from a variety of positionalities. These interpretations are arguably more comprehensive and certainly generate new knowledge and propositions about politics.

Interpretive standards of rigor emphasize transparency, reflexivity, and a responsiveness to the changing research context. Reflexivity is especially important for description. The creation of a concept fixes meaning so that the researcher ends up constituting the very thing she attempts to problematize. The positionality of the researcher has also to be considered. While objectivism is a tenet of positivism, feminists have long contended that it merely masks a socially dominant masculine perspective. Harding (1992) argues that it produces a less objective account of politics

than those that start from the lives of marginalized people and that explicitly account for the positionality and values of the researcher. Good interpretive research therefore treats concept formation and measurement carefully and transparently. For example, feminist scholars have debated extensively over the conceptualization of “gender” and “politics” for these reasons (Hawkesworth 2006). Any definition has political implications. Rather than “solving” the problem by providing a unified definition, the best feminist scholarship has resisted this closure by being transparent about its definitions and the subsequent limitations.

Interpretive research, therefore, is not “impressionistic”; it is systematic, without necessarily being linear (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, 70). While a positivist research design may (be idealized as) quite linear, proceeding deductively from hypothesis, to conceptualization and measurement, data collection, and so on, an interpretive research design begins with a question and a set of hunches. While the finished product is often much neater, with the process of discovery tucked away, interpretive scholars tend to be more forthright about the winding paths their research has taken (for a nice example, see the introduction of Scott 1998). Interpretive scholars may pursue research that generates a deep description of a particular individual or event, or a more general description across a larger research site or even a number of sites. For example, Laura Shepherd’s (2017) discourse analysis of the UN’s approach to peacebuilding draws upon hundreds of documents to explain how concepts like “peace”, “security”, and “civil society” are gendered. In contrast, Ingvild Bode (2019) analyzes five autobiographical narratives of female leaders at the UN to explain how gender shapes the barriers to women’s advancement up the ranks. Both contribute to our knowledge of how gender structures the UN as an institution.

#### *Sociological challenges to description, or “Where is your dependent variable?”*

Interpretive research offers a wealth of criteria for evaluating description. However, in my first Political Science graduate methodology class, we were told that anthropologists just “tell stories”. My professor reflected the widely-held view that an interpretive ethnographic approach that describes meaning-in-context is subordinate to a “scientific” approach that generates covering-law theories (Wedeen 2010). The common perception that interpretive approaches are not social-scientific means that scholars are unable to learn from a wide range of descriptive scholarship. Most political scientists have had little to no training in what constitutes good descriptive research, as many of those standards have been developed outside of political science or by interpretive political scientists who remain a minority in the discipline. Methods training focuses instead on complicated statistical techniques and strategies for causal inference. Plenty of descriptive interpretive work on politics already exists, but it is either not read, or read and evaluated according to an inappropriate set of positivist standards.

Biases against interpretive research, and description in turn, are multiplied through the discipline. This reinforces the problems described above by cutting off the pipeline of senior interpretive scholars who can offer diverse methodological training, including in descriptive research. According to the 2017 TRIPS survey of IR scholars, over 66 percent of IR scholars in the US identified as positivist. Self-identified non-positivist and post-positivist scholars were more likely to be female, and more likely to be of a lower and insecure academic rank than self-identified positivist scholars (Maliniak et al. 2017). Job ads that call for strong methodological skills usually equate these with positivist quantitative analysis. Additionally, seeing little interpretive research in flagship journals only reinforces the notion that this scholarship is not

worth taking seriously, and it drives away potential contributors, further narrowing the pool of submissions. This has led to a discipline in which interpretive standards for description have not formed part of the mainstream. Overcoming this is important for overcoming barriers to description more generally. Thankfully, the editors of APSR are now making efforts to encourage submissions from qualitative and interpretive scholars to address the heavy historical bias toward positivist quantitative work (APSR Editors 2022). Further efforts along these lines are needed.

### *Epistemological code-switching*

There is a danger that in promoting descriptive research there will be an impulse to give it greater credibility in the discipline by distancing it from “non-scientific” interpretation. Without accounting for disciplinary practices that devalue existing descriptive research, political scientists will end up reinforcing them. Moreover, if description is only valued for how it can facilitate positivist analysis, it will result in a sadly impoverished approach. One solution to this problem goes beyond a diversity of techniques within the confines of positivist research. Many scholars have tried to promote some version of pluralism or analytic eclecticism in political science in recent decades (Goertz and Mahoney 2012; Sil and Katzenstein 2010). Genuine diversity requires a recognition of important methodological differences and an appreciation of how different tools are fit for different jobs. Some research questions can best be answered using positivist research designs, while others require an interpretive approach.

This is not a call for “shared standards” (Brady and Collier 2010), so much as scholars being able to “code switch” between different interpretive and positivist approaches to descriptive rigor. Code switching refers to the ability to move between languages or registers and dialects, according to social setting. Successful code-switching means being able to choose the correct register for the context. In evaluating descriptive research, interpretive standards are an appropriate register in the broader language of social science. Many interpretive scholars, trained in mainstream methodology, are already able to code-switch between positivist and interpretive scholarship. Positivist scholars need more incentives and training to be able to speak in this register, which requires broader changes in the discipline.

### *Conclusion*

Interpretive scholarship provides a rich repertoire of techniques and standards for descriptive research that is under-utilized by mainstream political scientists. Interpretive standards can be applied not to solve, but to meaningfully contend with the challenges of description that cannot be adequately dealt with when one proceeds from positivist presuppositions. Framing description as in need of reconciliation with social scientific approaches will continue to subordinate it to causal inference, and reinforce the latter as the only valid form of scientific explanation. Instead proponents of description should (re-)familiarize themselves with the long tradition of description in interpretive social science and cast a critical eye on how political science debates have obscured this history.

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