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Interpretive Theories in Political Science

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to present the premises of the interpretative approach, with its internal diversity and methodological implications. While the first part of the paper discusses possible meanings connected with the concept of an interpretive approach, the second focuses on methodological implications and choices inspired by interpretivism.

Keywords: interpretivism, methodology, research design, meaning analysis, qualitative-interpretive methods

The promise of interpretive political science

In the preface to his monumental work on interpretive political science (ed. Bevir, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c; 2010d), Mark Bevir characterized it by analyses of meanings of human actions, techniques of textual analysis and ethnography, particular topics such as cultural practices and identities and finally particular dialogical and collaborative approaches to public policies (2010a, p. xix). I believe this introductory description unveils the value of interpretivism in political science (cf. Filipowicz, 2015; Bachryj-Krzywaźnia, 2016b). When talking about topics privileged by interpretive theories, Bevir mentioned studies of beliefs, identities and cultural practices and traditions (2010a, p. vii). Given the interpretive turn, highlighting the significance of meaning in social sciences (Yanow, Schwartz-Shea, 2015), it can only be expected that the discussion between positivist and interpretivist approaches would continue enriching political science research.

The premises of the interpretive approach

Paul Furlong and David Marsh in their chapter “A skin not a sweater: ontology and epistemology in political science” (2010) analysed interpretivism in the context of ontological and epistemological questions within political science. They described two broad ontological positions, one labelled as foundationalism/objectivism/realism, positing the existence of the so-called ‘real’ world, “independent of our knowledge of it” (2010, p. 185), and the second called anti-foundationalism/constructivism/relativism, assuming that the world is socially constructed. They proceeded to show how ontology influences epistemology and in turn methodological choices, so an anti-foundationalist ontology might be seen as leading to an interpretivist epistemology and preference for qualitative methods (2010, p. 186). They emphasized how contested this theoretical debate is, which is also reflected by the diversity of names and labels used by scholars to describe their ontological and epistemological positions.

The diversity of names and labels mentioned by Furlong and Marsh (2010) can be easily spotted through the literature review. We may then discuss interpretivism also in the context of two models for conducting research/science (Krauz-Mozer, 2005). The first model Barbara Krauz-Mozer described as analytical-empiricist, assuming the existence of external reality accessible via empirical research, the second one was labelled as hermeneutic-humanist. Krauz-Mozer presented the hermeneutic-humanist approach as internally diversified, including concepts so diverse as emphatic understanding of Max Weber’s and radical post-modern statements denying the possibility of external “truth”, and it seems clear that interpretive approaches (diverse as they are) bear much resemblance to and can be analysed within the hermeneutic-humanist model.

Furlong and Marsh clearly opposed positivist and interpretivist approaches, when presenting distinctions between what is scientific (also called positivist) and what is hermeneutic (or interpretivist). They also mentioned a possibility to add a third position, a realist one, thus further deepening the discussion. When describing the interpretivist tradition, they focused on “the meaning of behaviour” (Furlong, Marsh, 2010, p. 192), and understanding rather than explaining. Assuming (as mentioned above) that “the world is socially or discursively constructed”, and thus knowledge “theoretically or discursively laden”, the interpretivists “operate within discourses and traditions” (2010, p. 199).

In a similar manner, Bevir in his introduction to the first volume of “Interpretive political science” (2010a) clearly contrasted interpretivism with positivism. Despite the fact that interpretation played a prominent role in origins and roots of political science, such as history, law and philosophy, he claimed that so-called modernists and positivists of the twentieth century “tried to model political science on their view of the natural sciences as concerned with **laws and regularities** that governed social life **irrespective** of the beliefs of individuals

and the meanings found in a society” (2010a, p. xxii). Clearly, interpretivism suggests an alternative approach.

Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes in their chapter on the interpretive theory to the second edition of “Theory and methods in political science” (Bevir, Rhodes, 2002)¹, again focused on meanings shaping actions and institutions, and the assumption shared by many variants of interpretivism that “we cannot understand human affairs properly unless we grasp the relevant meanings” (2002, p. 2). Bevir and Rhodes identified two main strands of the contemporary interpretive theory: one rooted in history and generally humanities, and the second drawing inspiration from post-structuralist and post-modern thoughts.

When talking about fundamental premises of interpretivism, Bevir and Rhodes analysed the assumption that “people act on their beliefs and preferences” (2002, p. 4), implying that beliefs and preferences are causes for human actions. In doing so, they directly referred to one of the great debates in political science, namely “the [mere] possibility of a **science** of politics” (2002, p. 6). Since there is no external, empirically verifiable evidence of those beliefs, it is hard to imagine explaining causal relations (natural sciences alike) between behaviour and cognitive processes. What the authors suggested instead was explaining human actions by identifying “conditional and volitional links between beliefs, desires, intentions and actions”, calling it “a narrative form of explanation” (2002, p. 6).

Furthermore, Bevir and Rhodes presented their own approach. They defended **the concept of agency** of subjects making conscious choices motivated by their beliefs and values, even if restricted or influenced by social structures surrounding them. They suggested seeing social structures as ‘traditions’ acting “as the background” (2002, p. 15) to future actions chosen by individuals. These traditions were next defined as “theories or narratives, and associated practices” set in a given historical context but also “constantly evolving” (2002, p. 15). Also, they defended the concept of **objectivity**, though defined in a peculiar way and resting on comparing narratives rather than refuting them.

¹ I used the version available online, as well as the Polish translation (Marsh, Stoker, 2006). In the third edition quoted before, published in 2010, the chapter on interpretive theory was replaced by the chapter on constructivism and interpretive theory by Craig Parsons, focusing on constructivism. Also, in the newest, fourth edition (2017), contains the chapter by Parsons. As this article explores interpretive theories, and Parsons does not pay significant attention to them, focusing on constructivist approaches instead, I have chosen the previous editions for my analysis.

Interpretivism in a broader context of social sciences

While this paper focuses on the interpretivism, it is worth noting its relation with similar approaches, or paradigms. Quite often interpretivism is discussed along with the concept of constructivism. Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow in a book devoted to interpretive research design (2012) (discussed in detail in the later sections of that paper) even used the compound ‘constructivist-interpretivist’ in order to describe methodology assuming the existence of multiple, intersubjectively constructed “truths” (2012, p. 4). In fact, they did define “interpretivism” as encompassing “a broad array of schools with a variety of specific methods that are united by their **constructivist** ontological and **interpretive** epistemological presuppositions” (2012, p. 141), though they also noted the possibility of combining a constructivist ontology with an objectivist epistemology, as they suggested is characteristic of Wendt’s works (2012, p. 145).

Another alternative approach can be found in Creswell’s work on research design (2009), where he presented four philosophical worldviews, defined as “general orientations about the world and the nature of research” (2009, p. 6). He distinguished postpositivism, constructivism, pragmatism and an advocacy/participatory worldview. When describing the social constructivist worldview, Creswell referred to the assumption that “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work”, and also that “the [research] participants can construct the meaning of a situation, typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons” (2009, p. 8). Similarities between such a perspective and interpretivism are undeniable, Creswell also mentioned that these two perspectives are often combined, without exploring the potential differences between them.

Another source to consult would be the book by Michael Crotty, “The Foundations of Social Research” (Crotty, 1998). Crotty described the research process via the image of *scaffolding*, and four basic elements: methods, methodology, a theoretical perspective supporting chosen methodology, and epistemology informing the theoretical perspective. He further defined a theoretical perspective as “a philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria” and epistemology as “a theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (1998, p. 3). In Crotty’s view, constructionism is one of the epistemologies, while interpretivism a theoretical perspective (1998, p. 5).

Varieties of interpretation

When discussing various interpretative approaches, scholars usually start from hermeneutics, understood as a theory of understanding texts and actions (Bevir, 2010a). They refer also to phenomenology and ethnography focusing on “different forms of common-sense knowledge” (2010a, p. xxx). More recent inspirations for interpretive theories are drawn from post-structuralism and post-foundationalism.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give justice to all the internal discussions interpretivists held themselves (cf. Bachryj-Krzywaźnia, 2016a), it is useful to trace back and name several prominent contributors to the debate, bearing in mind that such a list is never complete nor satisfactory.² One of the first names brought forward by Michael Gibbons in his article on hermeneutics, political inquiry and practical reason (2010) is Wilhelm Dilthey. Analysing the difference between human sciences and natural sciences, Dilthey emphasized the significance of an “inner psychic dimension” (2010, p. 4) of human behaviour. As human sciences are to explore this inner reality, they need to turn to “literature, art, language, historical documents, laws, rituals, and institutions” through which it is “expressed or externalized” (2010, p. 4). The second person commonly referred to is Max Weber with his emphasis put on the process of understanding (*Verstehen*).

According to Gibbons, the ascendancy of positivist approaches in political science was not challenged until the late 1960s and 1970s. Then, critics started pointing out that the processes of power inclusion and exclusion were not satisfactorily recognized and analyzed by the proponents of the empiricist-behaviouralist approach. Thomas Kuhn’s conceptualization of paradigms shifts was also used by some, notably by Sheldon Wolin, to criticize the shortcomings of behaviouralism as a sign of the inadequacy of a positivist approach. Gibbons referred in addition to the work of Peter Winch, “The Idea of a Social Science”, who – building on works of Weber and Wittgenstein – sought to explain and understand human action by taking into account “the intentions, ideas and concepts available to the actors involved in the behaviour and institutions in question” (2010, p. 6).

Gibbons credited both Gadamer and Taylor for contributing to a turning point in the development of interpretive approaches, by further examining and elaborating the significance of the role of language in the context of social and political action. This emphasis on language and social practices helped over-

² For instance I do acknowledge that Gibbons’ reading of Hans-Georg Gadamer differs from the account presented by Thomas Schwandt in his article on three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry (2010), but the thorough analysis of these considerations goes beyond the scope of this paper.

come the limits of *verstehen* approach understood to focus on subjective intentions of actors. As Gibbons wrote, “one implication [of this language significance] (...) that distinguishes hermeneutic interpretation from *verstehen*, is that the interpretative understanding **must** go beyond the subjective intentions of actors” (2010, p. 8). The fact that ideas are being embedded in social practices must be recognized and acknowledged. As Gibbons asserted, the key to understanding of hermeneutic-interpretive perspective is to accept an embodied self, meaning that “it is always already situated in a historical-linguistic community that embodies a range and horizon of possible personal and public identity” (2010, p. 10).

Bevir in his introduction to interpretive political science (2010a) decides to look closer at Michel Foucault’s post-structuralism as the inspiration for new interpretive approaches. Foucault clearly opposes the possibility of pure experience, claiming that objects and actions came to existence only via discourse/language. As such, “human life is understandable only in a framework of meaning and this framework of meaning cannot be reduced to an objective process or structure” (2010a, p. xxxi). Bevir underlies Foucault’s unique hostility towards subject and reason, the subject seen as far from being autonomous, instead captured or even “a contingent product of particular discourses, techniques of power, and technologies of the self” (2010a, p. xxxii). This tension between elder and newer varieties of interpretative theory, according to Bevir, centres around the concepts of reason and subject, the elder ones seeing both of them almost as “pure and universal” (2010a, p. xxxii), the newer denying their autonomy.

Methodological implications of the interpretive approach

While exploring the links between ontological, epistemological and methodological choices, it seems valuable to refer again to Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow’s “Interpretive Research Design” (2012). They emphasized the uniqueness of interpretive research projects, focusing on “specific, situated meanings and meaning-making practices of actors in a given context” (2012, p. 1). They touched the issue of the existence of ‘real’ world external to researchers and the contestable concept of truth.

Interpretivism focusing on meaning-making processes draws heavily from ideas derived from hermeneutics and phenomenology. When presenting the list of those, Shea and Yanow started with the concept of the artefact embodying the meaning significant to its creator “at the time of [its] (...) creation” (2012, p. 42), thus implying that meanings and knowledge are always contextual and situated. In this view, the process of meaning-making is seen as a social practice, drawing from “lived experience” (2012, pp. 42–43).

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow showed that the same method can be used by researchers adopting different, conflicting even methodologies. Using the example of the interview, which can be conducted in order to establish “what really happened” thus relying on “a realist-objectivist methodology”, or on the contrary, the same technique of the interview may be used by the researcher following “a constructivist-interpretivist methodology” believing in “the existence of (potentially) multiple, *intersubjectively* constructed «truths»” (2012, p. 4). Furthermore, these understandings, or interpretations of the events are not external to the researcher, but rather they are co-generated, construed via interactions between the interviewer and the interviewed, as both of them attempt to “make those interpretations legible to each other” (2012, p. 4).

What is particularly interesting is the fact that Schwartz-Shea and Yanow contest a well-established in literature dichotomic distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, instead suggesting differentiating between quantitative, qualitative and interpretive research. Such an approach allows identifying two variances of qualitative research, one drawing from realist-objectivist premises (labelled followingly as qualitative), and the second, relying on a constructivist-interpretivist approach, called interpretive.³

When analyzing and presenting the process of working on research design, Shea and Yanow again emphasized the necessity of addressing all the ontological, epistemological and methodological issues discussed before (2012, pp. 18–19). The authors suggested that the reviewers focus on the logical link between the proposal research question and the chosen methods. They also postulated the integration of ethical dilemmas connected with research into designs, thus underlining their significance, especially within the framework of interpretivism.

When presenting the logics of inquiry, Shea and Yanow captivated the attention of a reader by a powerful image of a researcher likened to a captain of a ship. They explained that the interpretive research is not linear, nor does it start with a set of formal hypotheses. In order to explore that notion further, and also make the distinction between positivist and interpretivist modes of inquiry more accessible, they described the unique process of reasoning in quite a detail. Again, they challenged a typical assumption of the dichotomic distinction between quantitative research following a deductive logic – “reasoning that begins with theories, which lead to hypotheses, from which testable concepts are generated and then tested” (2012, p. 27), and qualitative research following an inductive

³ The authors accept that – for greater clarity – they should be using three compound adjectives to describe these three research approaches, i.e. quantitative-positivist methods, qualitative-positivist methods and qualitative-interpretive methods, yet they adopt the shorter versions „to make the language simpler” (Schwartz-Shea, Yanow, 2012, p. 6).

logic. Instead, they suggested an abductive⁴ logic of inquiry as the one informing interpretive research. Abduction then starts with what they called a puzzle, a surprise, a riddle to solve. The puzzles might be born out of a tension or a difference between the expectations fed by the academic literature and the experience of the field, or else by two contrasting events/experiences or conversations. It is quite important to acknowledge that the researchers do not start their activities *tabulae rasae*, but with some prior knowledge which led them to discover the very riddle or puzzle that they are now set to solve. The pattern of solving the puzzle, in other words formulating the interpretation or the explanation that “would render the surprise less surprising” (2012, p. 28), is then circular-spiral in its nature, and the process of reasoning labelled iterative-recursive.

The circular or spiral pattern of the interpretive research following the logic of abduction suggests that there are no final conclusions, in some way such research (or a journey) never ends. Quoting from Shea and Yanow again, “there are only momentary stopping points, to collect one’s thoughts, perhaps to publish or otherwise disseminate what one understands at that point in time” (2012, pp. 30–31).

The authors acknowledged the challenge of preparing a successful interpretive research proposal expected to “stipulate ahead of time” (Schwartz-Shea, Yanow, 2012, p. 33), before the field experience, desired results. If the conduct of research is to remain open, dynamic and flexible, the research design must reflect it. This is the context when this powerful image of a captain was used – instead of blindly following a course drawn on a dry paper map, a researcher adapts to changing weather conditions and is able to ride the waves.

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow criticized the interpretive methodologists for obscuring the process of theorizing in their research by overemphasizing the need for concepts to “emerge from the field” (2012, p. 38). It might have led proponents of other epistemic communities to conclude that an interpretive researcher is free from any prior knowledge when entering the research field. Not only it is not possible but also such an assumption is confusing in terms of broader inter-paradigm methodological discussions. The authors attributed this confusion to misunderstandings of Glaser and Strauss’s “grounded theory” approach. Shea and Yanow explained that it would be a mistake to assume that researchers merely transfer concepts as coined or expressed by research participants. Researchers should be understood as *sense-makers*, instead of messengers.

⁴ The usage of the abductive logic of reasoning in the context of political science, has also been described by Filip Pierzchalski (2013).

Methodological choices inspired by interpretivism

Even though, as Bevir claimed, there is no particular method or topic logically tied to the interpretive theories (Bevir, 2010b), there is clearly a preference for qualitative methods and techniques (cf. Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 2009). As it has been mentioned before, we should differentiate qualitative-positivist and qualitative-interpretivist methods (Schwartz-Shea, Yanow, 2012, p. 6), and it is still hard to imagine quantitative-interpretivist methods.

The final section of the article will be thus devoted to the concept of interpretive-qualitative methods and techniques. As Ariadne Vromen stated in her chapter “Debating Methods: Rediscovering Qualitative Approaches”, “the focus of qualitative methods in political science is on detailed, text-based answers that are often historical or include personal reflection from participants in political institutions, events, issues or processes” (2010, p. 249). Even though qualitative methods tend to be used more by those adopting a non-positivist epistemological position, it is still possible for those representing a positivist epistemological stance to be using it as well, so the difference – crucial from the perspective of this article – is, according to Vromen – “based on claims made about explanation, purpose and goals of research itself” (2010, p. 249). Schwartz-Shea and Yanow also touched that issue, when examining the risks of mixing methodologies and underlying those methodologies philosophical assumptions about reality (2012, pp. 130–135).

What might work here as a useful reminder is the fact that a descriptive qualitative approach dominated in political science for many years, with its traditional focus on political theory and legal and political institutions. However, this tradition has been challenged by positivist methodology and now it seems we are witnessing the dominance of quantitative methods, at least in some scholar communities (Vromen, 2010).⁵

Vromen discussed certain techniques, as she put it, “more oriented to producing qualitative data” (2010, p. 258). She mentioned in-depth interviews, focus groups, ethnography, but also text/document based techniques. Among the latter, Vromen distinguished between historiography, which she linked with the school of historical institutionalism, more interested in process tracing, and the interpretivist discourse analysis. This interpretive approach “locates the interpretation of texts within an analysis of broader social, political and cultural processes” (2010, p. 264). Vromen referred to works of Norman Fairclough who in his analytical framework identifies both micro analysis of vocabulary

⁵ Here Vromen used the example of the US-based political science where the majority of research published in top journals uses positivist quantitative methodology (2010, pp. 250–251).

and structure of texts and meso analysis of “the social production of texts” (2010, p. 264).⁶

Conclusions

This paper meant to explore the promise of interpretive political science, contributing to our understanding of human action and behaviour. The abundance of literature points to the internal diversity of the field, ongoing discussion on many varieties of interpretive theories, and the continuing debate between positivist and interpretivist approaches. The debate seems to not only enrich the field but also foster higher scientific reflexivity. Communicating the research results to members of different “epistemic communities” (Schwartz-Shea, Yanow, 2012, pp. 130–135) requires clear articulation (and so own understanding) of one’s own ontological and epistemological presuppositions.

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⁶ Fairclough himself identifies clearly with the critical discourse analysis. See Fairclough (2011). Vromen when analyzing his analytical framework mentioned also “macro analysis associated with social theory” (2010, p. 264) but exploring this theme further or analyzing the relations between interpretive and critical theories goes well beyond the scope of this paper.

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