

POLS2137

Meaning in Politics

Undergraduate course in Political Science

Australian National University

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Course Convenors

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Course Description

Interpretivism is an approach to inquiry that has evolved in the social sciences from the late 19th Century and has recently been consolidated. It begins with the empirical observation that societies are constructed out of our human capacity to communicate and therefore orients its inquiry toward language, meaning and communication. Interpretivist modes of inquiry have found a 'natural' home within disciplines dealing with social structure (such as sociology), disciplines confronting different cultures (such as anthropology) and disciplines whose data set tends to be textual, at least historically (such as the humanities and history). Interpretivist scholarship has also developed in conversation (and sometimes in debate) with more dominant approaches in the social sciences, often referred to as 'positivism'. The disciplines of Political Science and International Relations have been late comers to these developments but since the end of the cold war constructivist approaches have become part of the mainstream in International Relations and Political Science has recognised the importance of textual data in a world dominated by the use (and sometimes abuse) of Information Communications Technology. This course introduces students to this tradition. It is designed to get students 'thinking interpretively', alert students to the ways that communications and meaning structure our societies and engage them in analytical exercises designed to demonstrate the complexity of hermeneutical and other varieties of interpretive analysis, as well as encourage them to think about the methodological advantages and complexities of interpretive research.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion, students will have the knowledge and skills to: (1) Understand and identify the differences between interpretivist approaches and other approaches to knowledge production and inquiry; (2) Conceptualise research design from an interpretive perspective, including the interpretive approach to theory, analysis and data; (3) Develop techniques and skills appropriate to the design and conduct of interpretivist research; (4) Conceptualise methodological problems and apply tools to critically analyse data from within an interpretive frame; and, (5) Communicate effectively and demonstrate analytic ability in interpretivist research design and modes of inquiry.

Workload

A total of 142 hours of student learning time: (a) 36 hours of contact over 12 weeks: 24 hours of workshops and 12 hours of tutorials; (b) 12 hours of pre-recorded lectures; and, (c) 94 hours of independent student research, reading and writing.

Assessment

The assessment for this course is comprised of four assessment items:

1. **Self-Reflexivity Practicum** (1000 words) 15%.
2. **Research Essay** using the methodological approaches taught in class (2500 words) 40%.
3. **A mid-term quiz** consisting of (20 questions) with two hours to complete 15%.
4. **A multiple-choice exam** (40 questions) 30%.

1. Self-Reflexivity Practicum

Self-Reflexivity is a vital component to interpretive methods as it begins from a different set of assumptions about what we study and how. The role of the researcher and research ethics are built into research design in an explicit way that requires careful thinking through. This exercise asks students to think and write about how they are positioned in the world as investigating subjects. This is neither a statement of identity nor a declaration of biases, but rather it is an exercise in turning the same analytical gaze through which you might observe others onto yourself. You are not obliged to divulge any information that you do not feel comfortable with. If this exercise raises issues for you, please consult with conveners and we will devise an alternative assessment. Detailed instructions will be provided on wattle, preparation for writing will be supplied through class activities.

2. Research Essay

All of our activities in class are aimed at preparing students for the interpretive approach to social scientific inquiry, including research questions, research design, use of theory, modes of reasoning, generation of data and modes of analysis. After having the opportunity to

practice the skills required and being exposed to different examples of each approach, students are given the opportunity to try their hand in at least one of the approaches we've covered in class. Students are asked to generate their own research questions and topic in the interpretive mode of inquiry and write a research essay using at least one of the modalities of design and analysis explored in class, such as ethnography, Critical Discourse Analysis, and virtual ethnography. Students must carefully think through their choice of approach and pay attention to all the features of the interpretive mode of inquiry highlighted in class and write a well-researched, structured and argued essay. More detailed instructions and examples will be supplied on wattle and preparation supplied through class activity.

3. Mid-Term Quiz (Multiple Choice)

In this course students will be learning a lot of new vocabulary. A multiple-choice mid-term quiz will test students on their knowledge and understanding of this vocabulary, as well as provide an opportunity for students to check their progress on course materials. We will be generating a glossary of terms on the wattle site to further aid students in understanding this vocabulary.

4. Final Exam (Multiple Choice)

Students will be introduced to a wide variety of theories and approaches (though not exhaustive) in interpretive social science. The final exam is a form of summative assessment which ensures that students engage across the breadth of the course, and they come out with a full appreciation for what Interpretive modes of inquiry do differently. Because of the word length of formative assessment, the final exam will be multiple choice.

Course Breakdown

Each week students will be introduced to different aspects of interpretivist methods through lectures, workshops, a broad selection of readings, and podcast interviews with interpretivist scholars.

Week 1 – Introduction and Course Overview

Week 1 is used as an opportunity to provide an introduction to the course, the convenors, and set the groundwork for course structure:

- Introductions
- Talking through prior knowledge
- Why a course on interpretive methods?
- What are interpretivist methods?
- Course design, assessment and expectations of both students and convenors

Required Reading

Wierzbicka, Anna (2014). *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1 & 2.

Further Reading

Yanow, Dvora (2003). "Interpretive Political Science: What Makes This Not a Subfield of Qualitative Methods", *Qualitative Methods*, 1 (2): 9-13.

Yanow, Dvora (2013). *Interpretation and method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, New York: Routledge. Chapter 1.

Podcast

Interview with Dvora Yanow and Schwartz-Shea discussing their book "Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes": <https://newbooksnetwork.com/peregrine-schwartz-shea-and-dvora-yanow-interpretive-research-design-concepts-and-processes-routledge-2012>

Week 2 – What Distinguishes the Interpretive Approach?

Week 2 will provide an introduction to the philosophy of science and in particular the problem that language poses for it. Next, an exploration of the distinction between a 'naturalist' and 'anti-naturalist' approach, what that means for 'critical thinking' and the methodological choices that Interpretivists make will be provided. This week will conclude with two examples of what Sandra Harding calls the co-constitution of knowledge and society: the relationship between natural science, colonial history; and changing assumptions that science makes about gender.

Required Reading

Lynch, Cecelia (2014). *Interpreting International Politics*, New York: Routledge. Chapter 1.

Bevir, Mark and Jason Blakely (2018). *Interpretive social science: An anti-naturalist approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 1.

Further Reading

Bevir, Mark and Jason Blakely (2018). *Interpretive social science: An anti-naturalist approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Introduction.

Bevir, Mark, and R. A. W. Rhodes, eds. (2016). *Routledge handbook of interpretive political science*, London: Routledge, Introduction.

Law, John (2004). *After method: Mess in social science research*, London: Routledge. Introduction.

Rabinow, Paul, and William M. Sullivan, eds. (1979). *Interpretive social science: A reader*, Berkeley: University of California Press. Introduction.

Wedeen, Lisa (2020). "Anti-Naturalism and Structure in Interpretive Social Science." *Critical Review*, 31 (3-4): 481-488.

Yanow, Dvora, and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds. (2006). *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
Introduction.

Podcast

Interview with Mark Bevir and Jason Blakely discussing their (2018) book "Interpretive Social Science: An Anti-Naturalist Approach": <https://newbooksnetwork.com/mark-bevir-and-jason-blakely-interpretive-social-science-an-anti-naturalist-approach-oxford-up-2018>

Interview with Cecelia Lynch discussing her (2014) book "Interpreting International Politics": <https://newbooksnetwork.com/interpreting-international-politics>

Week 3 – Introduction to Social Theory

This week examines the origins of social theory in anthropology and sociology through the work of Weber, Marx, and Foucault. This will be followed by a discussion of how these inform the interpretivist approach to the use of theory in research design and how this leads to different modes of reasoning: deductive, inductive and abductive/retroductive.

Required Reading

Elliot, Anthony (2021). *Contemporary Social Theory: An Introduction*, London: Routledge.
Chapters 1 & 4.

Additional Reading

Bevir, Mark (2000) "The Role of Contexts in Understanding and Explanation", *Human Studies*, 23 (4): 395-411.

Goodin, Robert & Charles Tilly, eds. (2006) *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Chapters 3 & 4 (by Louise Antony and Colin Hay)

Week 4 – What is a Concept?

Concepts are central to research, but they are also the locus of methodological problems such as agreement over definition, conceptual overstretch and operationalisation for the purposes of quantification. Interpretivists have a different approach to concepts to the one developed in much of Political Science scholarship, one that is consistent with the socially constitutive character of language use. This week looks at the socially constitutive character of concepts in the work of Conceptual Historian Reinhardt Koselleck and an interpretivist methodological approach to working with concepts by Frederic Schaffer.

Required Reading

Schaffer, Frederic Charles (2016). *Elucidating social science concepts: An interpretivist guide*, New York: Routledge. Chapter 1.

Additional Reading

Ewing, Blake (2020) "Conceptual history, contingency and the ideological politics of time", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 26 (3): 262-277.

James, Paul, and Manfred B. Steger (2014). "A genealogy of 'globalization': The career of a concept" *Globalizations*, 11 (4): 417-434.

Koselleck, Reinhart , and Michaela W. Richter (2006). "Crisis", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67 (2): 357-400.

Onuf, Nicholas Greenwood (1991). "Sovereignty: Outline of a conceptual history", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 16 (4): 425-446.

Sartori, Giovanni (1970). "Concept misinformation in comparative politics", *American Political Science Review*, 64 (4): 1033-1053.

Silverman, Gahl & Udi Sommer (2019). "Prevalent sentiments of the concept of Jihad in the public commentsphere", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 45 (7): 579-607.

Podcast

Interview with Fred Schaffer discussing "Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide": <https://newbooksnetwork.com/frederic-c-schaffer-elucidating-social-science-concepts-an-interpretivist-guide-routledge-2015/>

Week 5 – What is Social Constructivism?

This week examines some of the scholarship which informs the Interpretivist approach to social ontology. First, students will be introduced to the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman whose 1966 book "The Social Construction of Reality" is among the earliest in what was then a new field of sociology: the Sociology of Knowledge. Berger and Luckman ask the question, if human societies are socially constructed, why do we apprehend them as 'natural'? This can be thought of as a moment of disciplinary "self-reflexivity" and it gave rise in the twentieth century to a series of disciplinary histories. This week's lecture will introduce some of disciplinary histories of political science which have demonstrated the role the social sciences have played in naturalising and constructing social categories.

Required Reading

Bowker, Geoffrey C., and Susan Leigh Star (1999). *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Chapter 6.

Tuhiwai Smith, Linda (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, London: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional. Introduction.

Additional Reading

Bruffee, Kenneth A. (1986). "Social construction, language, and the authority of knowledge: A bibliographical essay", *College English*, 48 (8): 773-790.

Golinski, Jan (2005). *Making natural knowledge: Constructivism and the history of science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Preface and Chapter 1.

Merry, Sally Engle (2016). *The seductions of quantification: Measuring human rights, gender violence, and sex trafficking*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1.

Shiner, Larry. (1982). "Reading Foucault: Anti-method and the genealogy of power-knowledge", *History and Theory*, 21 (3): 382-398.

Week 6 – Hermeneutics

It has been emphasised throughout the course that interpretivism as a mode of inquiry has a philosophical orientation to ontology as socially constructed via the human capacity for language, meaning and communication. While Interpretivism cannot be reduced to text-based analytical techniques, a substantial amount of data that can be generated is textual (and increasingly multi-modal). For that reason the methods discussed this week will focus on textual, documentary data and discursive approaches. To do that, the long tradition of hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) will be introduced, which begins in the humanities, history and philosophy and subsequently comes to inform the work that we do in the political and social sciences.

Required Reading

Olesen, Jens (2016). "Hermeneutics." In *Routledge handbook of interpretive political science*, Bevir, Mark, and R. A. W. Rhodes, eds. London: Routledge. Chapter 4.

Josselson, Ruthellen (2004). "The Hermeneutics of Faith and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion", *Narrative Inquiry*, 14 (1): 1-28.

Additional Reading

Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1967) "The Historicity of Understanding" In *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*. Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt eds. 2006, New York: Continuum. Chapter 9.

Gjesdal, Kristin (2010). "Hermeneutics" In *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*. Bevir, Mark eds. 2010, California: Sage Publications Inc. 615-619.

Ricoeur, Paul (1981). "The task of hermeneutics", In *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences* Thompson, John B. eds. 2016. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1.

Simpson, Lorenzo C. (2021) *Hermeneutics as Critique: Science, Politics, Race, and Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 2.

Godrej, Farah (2011). *Cosmopolitan Political Thought: Method, Practice, Discipline*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 3.

Prasad, Anshuman & Raza Mir (2002). "Digging deep for meaning: A critical hermeneutic analysis of CEO letters to shareholders in the oil industry", *Journal of Business Communication*, 39 (1): 92-116.

Blakely, Jason (2019). "The Hermeneutics of Policing: An Analysis of Law and Order Technocracy", *Critical Review*, 31 (2): 160-178.

Week 7 – Sociolinguistics and CDA

The science of interpretation as developed in the disciplines of the Humanities and History was delved into in previous weeks. This week will elaborate on this further by situating textual artefacts within their 'mode of production' by exploring further the variety of different inferences that can be drawn from textual artefacts. This week will additionally emphasise the materiality of textual artefacts, the socially constitutive role of language, meaning and communication and we will introduce 'socio-linguistics'. Everything done up to now provides us with a foundation for an introduction to Socio-Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Required Reading

Fairclough, Norman (1993). "Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities", *Discourse and Society*, 4 (2): 133-168.

Additional Reading

Burr, Vivien (1995). *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, London: Routledge. Chapter 3.

El-Nashar, Mohamed & Heba Nayef (2019). "'Cooking the Meal of Terror' Manipulative Strategies in Terrorist Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis of ISIS Statements, Terrorism and Political Violence", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34 (1): 155-175.

Janks, Hilary (1997). "Critical Discourse Analysis as a research tool" *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 18 (3): 329-342.

Sengul, Kurt (2019). "Critical discourse analysis in political communication research: a case study of right-wing populist discourse in Australia", *Communication Research and Practice*, 5 (4): 376-392.

Macdonell, Diane (1986). *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell. Chapter 6.

Van Dijk, Teun A. (1993). "Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis", *Discourse and Society*, 4 (2): 249-283.

Milliken, Jennifer (1999). "The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods", *European Journal of International Relations*, 5 (2): 225-254.

Wodak, Ruth (2001). "What CDA is about", In *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, Wodak, Ruth. & Meyer Michael eds., London: Sage Publication Ltd.

Week 8 – Advancing CDA

This week continues with Critical Discourse Analysis but moves beyond surface text analysis with a focus on organised structures of meaning, power and governance. We will look at how Fairclough's approach takes us outside the text, looking at genre, re-contextualisation, inter-textuality, inter-discursivity and orders of discourse. We will consider the implications of how CDA invites us to understand and analyse institutions and organisation and alert students to the existence of the variety of approaches to CDA, such as the Discourse Historical Approach, Multi-modal Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics. As seen in the previous week covering CDA, this approach is quite technical, with a lot of vocabulary and a series of methodological steps. This week we will also look at the introduction of automated and quantitative text analysis in this field and we will assess the advantages and disadvantages of mixed methods approaches and the suitability of quantification to research design in all cases.

Required Reading

Fairclough, Norman (1992). "Intertextuality in Critical Discourse Analysis", *Linguistics and Education*, 4: 269-293.

Oostendorp, Marcelyn (2015). "The Multimodal Construction of the Identity of Politicians", *Critical Discourse Studies*, 12 (1): 39-56.

Additional Reading

Farrelly, Michael (2020) "Rethinking intertextuality in CDA", *Critical Discourse Studies*, 17 (4): 359-376.

Gee, James Paul, and Michael Hansford (2012). *Routledge handbook of discourse analysis*, London & New York: Routledge, Chapters 3 and 37 (by Kress and Wodak).

Veum, Auslag, and Linda Victoria Moland Undrum (2018) "The selfie as a global discourse", *Discourse & Society*, 29 (1): 86–103.

Week 9 – Ethnography

This week introduces ethnography: a research method with strong traditions in anthropology and sociology that in recent years political scientists have increasingly adopted. Initial discussion will focus on some of the basic features of ethnography as an interpretive enterprise, and about the technique of 'thick description'. This will lead to

considering how contextual and situated fieldwork and direct observation provides insights for the social sciences that are not available to researchers using other research designs.

Required Reading

Wedeen, Lisa (2009). "Ethnography as Interpretive Enterprise", In *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, Schatz, Edward eds., Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 3.

Brodin, Evelyn Z. (2017). "The Ethnographic Turn in Political Science: Reflections on the State of the Art", *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 50 (1): 131-134.

Ghodsee, Kristen (2016). *From Notes to Narrative: Writing Ethnographies That Everyone Can Read*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 3.

Additional Reading

Ponterotto, Joseph G. (2006). "Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept 'Thick Description'", *The Qualitative Report*, 11 (3): 538-549.

Geertz, Clifford (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books Inc. Chapter 1.

Fujii, Lee Ann (2015). "Five stories of accidental ethnography: turning unplanned moments in the field into data", *Qualitative Research*, 15 (4): 525-539.

Verdery, Katherine (2018). *My Life as a Spy*, Durham: Duke University Press. Prologue.

Goffman, Alice (2014). *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 2.

Week 10 – Political Ethnography

This week concentrates on the political in ethnography. Starting with a look at how political science has adapted to immersive study, moving on to then tackle questions to do with choices about entry, access and positionally in your field site, as well as problems of power/knowledge. Finally, this week examines how political scientists have grappled with these problems in ways that provide important methodological insights and enabled fruitful observations.

Required Reading

Pachirat, Timothy (2009). "The Political in Political Ethnography: Dispatches from the Kill Floor", In *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, Schatz, Edward eds., Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 6.

Shehata, Samer (2006). "Ethnography, identity and the production of knowledge." In *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*, Yanow, Dvora, and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe. Chapter 13.

Gupta, Akhil (1995). "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State", *American Ethnologist*, 22 (2): 375-402.

Additional Reading

Baiocchi, Gianpaolo and Connor, Brian T. (2008). "The Ethnos in the Polis: Political Ethnography as a Mode of Inquiry", *Sociology Compass*, 2 (1): 139-155.

Schatz, Edward (2009). "Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics", In *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, Schatz, Edward eds., Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wedeen, Lisa (2010). "Reflections on ethnographic work in political science", *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13: 255-272.

Simmons, Erica S. and Rush Smith, Nicholas (2021). "Comparisons with an Ethnographic Sensibility: Studies of Protest and Vigilantism", In *Rethinking Comparison: Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry*, Simmons, Erica S. and Rush Smith, Nicholas eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kyed, Helene Maria (2017). "Predicament: Interpreting Police Violence (Mozambique)", In *Writing the World of Policing: The Difference Ethnography Makes*, Fassin, Didier eds., Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

De León, Jason (2015). *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, Oakland, California: University of California Press. Introduction.

Week 11 – Interpretive Methods in the Digital Age

In keeping with the emphasis on the sociological and socially constitutive nature of communication, this week introduces students to interpretive approaches to digital and communications technology. Where communications technology has made new kinds of knowledge production possible involving new kinds of network analysis, new objects of enquiry and big data sets of human behaviour across the planet, the interpretive approach includes an emphasis on the sociology of communications technology itself, rather than seeing technology as an inert and neutral window onto human behaviour. This week looks at emerging scholarship from the UK and Australia's RMIT which invite us to consider a range of ways digital technologies change ethnography and CDA but in addition, the range of insights that interpretive approaches enable for digital inquiry. This invites us to consider all kinds of multimodal data generation and analysis.

Required Reading

Hine, Christine (2016). "From virtual ethnography to the embedded, embodied, everyday Internet", In *The Routledge companion to digital ethnography*, Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway and Genevieve Bell, eds. London: Routledge. Chapter 2.

Hine, Christine (2011). "Towards ethnography of television on the internet: A mobile strategy for exploring mundane interpretive activities", *Media, Culture & Society*, 33 (4): 567-582.

Knox, Hannah (2016). " An Infrastructural Approach to Digital Ethnography: Lessons from the Manchester Infrastructures of Social Change Project", In *The Routledge companion to digital ethnography*, Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway and Genevieve Bell, eds. London: Routledge. Chapter 32.

Additional Reading

Burrell, Jenna (2016). "The Fieldsite as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research", In *The Routledge companion to digital ethnography*, Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway and Genevieve Bell, eds. London: Routledge. Chapter 5.

Postill, John (2016). "Remote Ethnography: Studying Culture from Afar", In *The Routledge companion to digital ethnography*, Larissa Hjorth, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway and Genevieve Bell, eds. London: Routledge. Chapter 6.

Hine, Christine (2011). *Virtual ethnography*, London: Sage. Chapters 1, 2 and 3.

Week 12 – Conclusion and Exam Preparation

While much has been covered, not everything there is to know about interpretive methods has been covered in this course. That being said, this does provide quite a significant start towards understanding interpretivist methods. This course has offered a depth of focus on ethnography, hermeneutics and discourse analysis. This week will provide a review of the extensive ground covered throughout the course, and to give guidance and advice on what students can expect for the upcoming exam. The readings, lectures, and tutorial activities throughout have been designed to give students an excellent head-start in preparing for their final assessments.