POLS2137
Meaning in Politics
Undergraduate course in Political Science
Australian National University

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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 short practicum activities, one longer analytical piece and a multiple choice exam that will occur in the exam period.

1. Practicum Activities (4X 500 words each) 20%

Practical training for interpretive methods have been organised around four practicum activities in which students are instructed to engage in a cascading set of exercises that build up their observational, analytic and interpretive capabilities. These activities are designed in such a way to help students develop the kinds of skills required to engage in forms of (auto)ethnography, thick descriptive, hermeneutic, discursive and social constructivist approaches. They are designed to build upon students' observational capacity and they operate in conjunction with lectures and the workshop in such a way that students get a chance to observe in practice the complexities of different interpretive approaches. Students are invited to consider the variety of data they can collect, how the data relate the actions, institutions and actors under investigation, the limitations to data collection and some various (but not universal) ways around it and how the various approaches explored in lectures and workshops change our 'reading' and analysis of data. These practicums are designed to be a gentle and immersive way to introduce students to interpretive modes of inquiry and demonstrate the differences with other approaches. The practicum combined with lectures and reading materials are selected to demonstrate interpretive approaches in action are designed to build student capacity to think about interpretive research design and incorporate interpretive approaches and analysis in their future research.

2. Analysis Piece (1500 words) 40%

Students are given a choice between conducting an ethnography, a hermeneutic analysis or a Critical Discourse 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 ONE of the approaches we've covered in class. Students are encouraged to select a field site/artefact from the observations conducted in one of the four practicums. This assessment is NOT a traditional essay in which the student supplies a research question, literature review, analysis and conclusion, rather students can think of it as the analysis portion of an essay. The analysis needs to be introduced, contextualised and broader inferences developed but the focus of the piece should be students demonstrating their analytical ability in the

chosen mode of inquiry, paying attention to the theoretical and methodological issues explored in class.

3. Final Exam (Multiple Choice) 40%

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.

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Week 1. Introduction and course overview

Welcome!
What we'll do today: Introductions
Talking through prior knowledge
Why a course on interpretivist methods?
What are interpretivist methods?
Course design, assessment and expectations

Reading

Yanow, Dvora. 2003. "Interpretive empirical political science: What makes this not a subfield of qualitative methods." *Qualitative Methods* 1 (2):9-13.

Podcast

Interview with Yanow and Schwartz-Shea: https://newbooksnetwork.com/peregrine-schwartz-shea-and-dvora-yanow-interpretive-research-design-concepts-and-processes-routledge-2012

Week 2. What distinguishes the interpretive approach?

Last week we introduced the idea that there is a politics of knowledge production, the situated and worldly nature of social science research and that there have been debates and contestations within the social sciences about the nature and purposes of the knowledge we produce. This week we will explore further the philosophical premises of Interpretive Social Science. We'll provide an introduction to the philosophy of science and in particular the problem that language poses for it. We will explore the distinction between a 'naturalist' and 'anti-naturalist' approach, what that means for critical thinking and understanding human societies as socially constructed, and introduce the idea that interpretivists approach theory, data, reason and design differently from other researchers in the social sciences.

Reading

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

Further reading

Bevir, Mark, and RAW 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* DOI: 10.1080/08913811.2019.1730591

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 Bevir and Blakely: https://newbooksnetwork.com/mark-bevir-and-jason-blakely-interpretive-social-science-an-anti-naturalist-approach-oxford-up-2018

Week 3. What's the context?

Very often comparisons between quantitative and qualitative research make a distinction between contextualised versus a-contextual, panoptic and aggregate observations. This is especially contested when scholars make calls for the generalisability of findings which is often countered with the notion that there are specificities to certain contexts that confound generalisability and universal laws. This week we'll invite students to think about context. What is it and how do you decide? Relatedly, we'll elaborate on the interpretive approach to modes of reasoning, which expand beyond deductive and inductive to include abductive and retroductive reasoning.

Reading

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

Further reading

Ayim, Maryann 1974. "Retroduction: The rational instinct." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 10 (1):34-43.

Bevir, Mark. 2000. "The role of contexts in understanding and explanation." *Human Studies* 23 (4):395-411.

Goodin, Robert E., and Charles Tilly, eds. 2006. *The Oxford handbook of contextual political analysis.* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapters 3 & 4 (Antony and Hay)

Sæther, Bjørnar 1998. "Retroduction: An alternative research strategy?" *Business Strategy and the Environment* 7:245-249.

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 we look 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.

Reading

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

Further reading

Ewing, Blake. 2020. "Conceptual history, contingency and the ideological politics of time." *Journal of Political Ideologies* DOI: 10.1080/13569317.2020.1855766

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* DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2019.1686854

Podcast

Interview with Fred Schaffer: https://newbooksnetwork.com/frederic-c-schaffer-elucidating-social-science-concepts-an-interpretivist-guide-routledge-2015/

Week 5. Introduction to Ethnography

This week we give students an introduction to the very rich tradition of ethnography as it emerges out of Anthropology and Sociology. We will situate this approach within the disciplinary histories of Anthropology and Sociology and emphasise it's recent (comparatively) emergence in Political Science. We will introduce students to the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the methodological technique of thick description. Here we will consider how contextual and situated fieldwork and direct observation provides insights for the social sciences and how some of the early pioneers tabled substantial challenges to the claims made by naturalist approaches.

Reading

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture." In *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books. (Also if you have time read "Deep play")

Further reading

Bejarano, Carolina Alonso, Lucia López Juárez, Mirian A. Mijangos García, and Daniel M. Goldstein. 2019. *Decolonizing ethnography : Undocumented immigrants and new directions in social science*. Durham: Duke University Press. Chapter 1.

Geertz, Clifford. 1983. "'From the native's point of view': On the nature of anthropological understanding." In *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology*, 55-70. New York: Basic Books.

Pachirat, Timothy. 2011. *Every twelve seconds: Industrialzed slaughter and the politics of sight*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Chapters 1 and 2.

Ponterotto, Joseph G. . 2006. "Brief note on the origins, evolution, and meaning of the qualitative research concept 'thick description'." *Qualitative Report* 11 (3):538-549.

Week 6. Immersive study: Introduction to political ethnography

This week we look at the take up of ethnography in political science. We will look at a variety of examples of how political science has adapted immersive study, including the methodological problems of lies, choices about entry into field site, and the problems of power/knowledge and closed contexts. We will look at how political scientists have grappled with these problems in ways that provide important methodological insights and enabled fruitful observations. In workshop we will think through different scenarios for immersive study.

Reading

Koch, Natalie. 2013. "Field methods in 'closed contexts': undertaking research in authoritarian states and places." *Area* 45 (4):390-395. (And see the essays that follow in this special symposium.)

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.

Further reading

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

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2008. "The power of local ties: Popular participation in the Rwandan genocide." *Security Studies* 17 (3):568-597.

Wedeen, Lisa. 2002. "Conceptualizing culture: Possibilities for political science." *American Political Science Review* 96 (4):713-728.

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

Podcast

Interview with Lisa Wedeen: https://newbooksnetwork.com/authoritarian-apprehensions

Week 7. Introduction to social constructivism: The sociology of knowledge

As we saw in the work of Bevir and Blakely, interpretivism can be closely associated with social constructivism because the interpretivist approach is anti-naturalist. This is an approach to understanding social ontology that emerged in the mid-twentieth century in sociology and had a substantial impact across the social sciences. This week introduces students to the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann 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 Luckmann ask the question, if human societies are socially constructed, why do we apprehend them as natural? The work of Berger and Luckmann marks an important intellectual shift in the twentieth century which is core to the interpretivist approach: the understanding of social ontology as socially constructed, the role of language, meaning and communication in the human ability to construct social realities, and a second-order observation in which knowledge production itself becomes an object of inquiry. You can think of this as a moment of disciplinary "self-reflexivity" and it gave rise in the twentieth century to a series of disciplinary histories and variety of theoretical developments, among which are the work of Michel Foucault and Science and Technology Studies.

Reading

Mitchell, Timothy. 1991. "The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics " *American Political Science Review* 85 (1):77-96.

Further 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. New 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 8. Introduction to hermeneutics

We've emphasised throughout the course that interpretivism as a mode of inquiry has a philosophical orientation to social ontology which it understands 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 we will focus for the next few weeks on textual, documentary data and discursive approaches. To do that we need to give you some introduction to the long tradition of hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) and the linguistic turn, an approach to the philosophy of language that arises out of the humanities, in particular, History and Philosophy, before it spreads to other disciplines. We'll introduce the concept of mimetic reading, and differentiate it from critical hermeneutics. In the workshop this week we'll begin working with documents. We'll introduce the idea that reading is a skill which should be done actively. We'll explore the variety of things you can read for, and the concepts of prejudgement and distanciation, and we'll explore how readings change when new information is brought to bear in our reading.

Reading

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

Further reading

Dryzek, John. 1982. "Policy analysis as a hermeneutic activity." *Policy Sciences* 14:309-329.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1979. "The problem of historical knowledge." In *Interpretive social science: A reader.* Rabinow, Paul, and William M. Sullivan, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press. Chapter 3. (See also Ricoeur, Chapters 2 & 9)

Gallagher, Shaun. 2004. "Hermeneutics and the cognitive sciences." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 11 (10-11):162-174.

Prasad, Anshuman, and 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.

Ricoeur, Paul. 1968. "Structure-word-event." *Philosophy Today* 12 (2):114-129.

Week 9. Introduction to sociolinguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis

Last week we delved into the different approaches to the text as artefact that can be encountered in the humanities. We saw that there are multiple different ways for thinking about words on the page. This week we will elaborate this further by situating textual artefacts within their mode of production. We will begin thinking about a sociology of communications technology, will introduce the materiality of textual artefacts, the socially constitutive role of language, meaning and communication and socio-linguistics. A methodological approach to the study of politics emerged from this subfield and the work of Ruth Wodak and Norman Fairclough in the 1980s and 1990s provides a systematic way of understanding the intrinsic connection between language, meaning, communication and the institutions and organisations through which we live. We will aim this week to provide an introduction, explain the approach and give some guidance on how and why to do Critical Discourse Analysis. We will focus on the kinds of 'surface text' analytical operations we can conduct using Fairclough's approach. In the workshop we will familiarise ourselves with Fairclough's conceptual scaffolding.

Reading

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

Further reading

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." DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2019.1676238

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.

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

Week 10. Advancing CDA

This week we will continue working with Critical Discourse Analysis but moving 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, into context, genre, discursive practice, re-contextualisation, inter-textuality, inter-discursivity and orders of discourse. We will consider how CDA invites us to understand and analyse institutions and organisation and note the variety of approaches to CDA, such as the Discourse Historical Approach, Multi-modal Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics. As you will have seen from last week, this approach is quite technical. We will emphasise this week that if your analysis remains linguistic and at the level of text only, you are not doing CDA. This week we will also look at the introduction of automated and quantitative text analysis in this field and assess the advantages and disadvantages of mixed methods approaches and the suitability of quantification to research design in all cases. In the workshop we will work with Fairclough's concepts of genre, textual chains, inter-textuality, inter-discursivity, and re-contextualisation.

Reading

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

Majstorović, Danijela. 2009. "Generic characteristics of the Office of the High Representative's press releases, ." *Critical Discourse Studies* 6 (3):199-214.

Further reading

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

Kress, Gunther. 2011. "Multimodal discourse analysis " In *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, James Paul Gee and Michael Handford, eds. London: Routledge. Chapter 3.

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

Wodak, Ruth. 2009. *The discourse of politics in action: Politics as usual.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. Chapter 1.

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. Here we will look at emerging scholarship from the UK and Australia that invites 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. In the workshop we will explore Virtual Ethnography and Multimodal Discourse Analysis and how they are different and can be combined.

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. (See also Chapters 5 and 6, Burrell and Postill.)

Further reading

Hine, Christine. 2011. Virtual ethnography. London: Sage. Introduction, Chapters 1 and 3.

Week 12. Conclusion and preparation for exam

We have not covered all interpretive methods in this course, though we've covered a lot. Today we will provide a review of the extensive ground we've covered. The multiple-choice exam is based upon the required readings and lectures. We will provide some advice and guidance on what to expect but if you have been attending lectures, tutorials and keeping up with the reading you have already begun preparation.

No readings this week. Workshop and tutorial will be devoted to exam preparation.