Readings : WHAT IS INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH?

Interpretive research methodologies and methods are not new but are today in a minority position in political science disciplinary training and mainstream journals. Over the last decade, there has been increasing interest in, and recognition and support of, "qualitative" methods in the social sciences broadly and in the discipline of political science, in particular. At the same time, "interpretive" methodologies and methods have also been drawing greater attention. Whereas the philosophical grounding of interpretive research has long been clear, empirical issues of research design, research practice, and appropriate assessment have recently been developed in ways that can assist doctoral students and junior scholars to make their research more rigorous and to communicate their findings more effectively.

The term “interpretive research” is often used loosely and synonymously with “qualitative research”, although the two concepts are quite different. Interpretive research is a research paradigm (see Chapter 3) that is based on the assumption that social reality is not singular or objective, but is rather shaped by human experiences and social contexts (ontology), and is therefore best studied within its socio-historic context by reconciling the subjective interpretations of its various participants (epistemology). Because interpretive researchers view social reality as being embedded within and impossible to abstract from their social settings, they “interpret” the reality though a “sense-making” process rather than a hypothesis testing process. This is in contrast to the positivist or functionalist paradigm that assumes that the reality is relatively independent of the context, can be abstracted from their contexts, and studied in a decomposable functional manner using objective techniques such as standardized measures. Whether a researcher should pursue interpretive or positivist research depends on paradigmatic considerations about the nature of the phenomenon under consideration and the best way to study it.

However, qualitative versus quantitative research refers to empirical or data -oriented considerations about the type of data to collect and how to analyze them. Qualitative research relies mostly on non-numeric data, such as interviews and observations, in contrast to quantitative research which employs numeric data such as scores and metrics. Hence, qualitative research is not amenable to statistical procedures such as regression analysis, but is coded using techniques like content analysis. Sometimes, coded qualitative data is tabulated quantitatively as frequencies of codes, but this data is not statistically analyzed. Many puritan interpretive researchers reject this coding approach as a futile effort to seek consensus or objectivity in a social phenomenon which is essentially subjective.

Although interpretive research tends to rely heavily on qualitative data, quantitative data may add more precision and clearer understanding of the phenomenon of interest than qualitative data. For example, Eisenhardt (1989), in her interpretive study of decision making n high-velocity firms (discussed in the previous chapter on case research), collected numeric data on how long it took each firm to make certain strategic decisions (which ranged from 1.5 months to 18 months), how many decision alternatives were considered for each decision, and surveyed her respondents to capture their perceptions of organizational conflict. Such numeric data helped her clearly distinguish the high-speed decision making firms from the low-speed decision makers, without relying on respondents' subjective perceptions, which then allowed her to examine the number of decision alternatives considered by and the extent of conflict in high-speed versus low-speed firms. Interpretive research should attempt to collect both qualitative and quantitative data pertaining to their phenomenon of interest, and so should positivist research as well. Joint use of qualitative and quantitative data, often called "mixed-mode designs", may lead to unique insights and are highly prized in the scientific community.

Interpretive research has its roots in anthropology, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and semiotics, and has been available since the early 19 th century, long before positivist techniques were developed. Many positivist researchers view interpretive research as erroneous and biased, given the subjective nature of the qualitative data collection and interpretation process employed in such research. However, the failure of many positivist techniques to generate interesting insights or new knowledge have resulted in a resurgence of interest in interpretive research since the 1970's, albeit with exacting methods and stringent criteria to ensure the reliability and validity of interpretive inferences.

Distinctions from Positivist Research

In addition to fundamental paradigmatic differences in ontological and epistemological assumptions discussed above, interpretive and positivist research differ in several other ways. First, interpretive research employs a theoretical sampling strategy, where study sites, respondents, or cases are selected based on theoretical considerations such as whether they fit the phenomenon being studied (e.g., sustainable practices can only be studied in organizations that have implemented sustainable practices), whether they possess certain characteristics that make them uniquely suited for the study (e.g., a study of the drivers of firm innovations should include some firms that are high innovators and some that are low innovators, in order to draw contrast between these firms), and so forth. In contrast, positivist research employs random sampling (or a variation of this technique), where cases are chosen randomly from a population, for purposes of generalizability. Hence, convenience samples and small samples are considered acceptable in interpretive research as long as they fit the nature and purpose of the study, but not in positivist research.

Second, the role of the researcher receives critical attention in interpretive research. In some methods such as ethnography, action research, and participant observation, the researcher is considered part of the social phenomenon, and her specific role and involvement in the research process must be made clear during data analysis. In other methods, such as case research, the researcher must take a "neutral" or unbiased stance during the data collection and analysis processes, and ensure that her personal biases or preconceptions does not taint the nature of subjective inferences derived from interpretive research. In positivist research, however, the researcher is considered to be external to and independent of the research context and is not presumed to bias the data collection and analytic procedures.

Third, interpretive analysis is holistic and contextual, rather than being reductionist and isolationist. Interpretive interpretations tend to focus on language, signs, and meanings from the perspective of the participants involved in the social phenomenon, in contrast to statistical techniques that are employed heavily in positivist research. Rigor in interpretive research is viewed in terms of systematic and transparent approaches for data collection and analysis rather than statistical benchmarks for construct validity or significance testing.

Lastly, data collection and analysis can proceed simultaneously and iteratively in interpretive research. For instance, the researcher may conduct an interview and code it before proceeding to the next interview. Simultaneous analysis helps the researcher correct potential flaws in the interview protocol or adjust it to capture the phenomenon of interest better. The researcher may even change her original research question if she realizes that her original research questions are unlikely to generate new or useful insights. This is a valuable but often understated benefit of interpretive research, and is not available in positivist research, where the research project cannot be modified or changed once the data collection has started without redoing the entire project from the start.

Benefits and Challenges of Interpretive Research

Interpretive research has several unique advantages. First, they are well-suited for exploring hidden reasons behind complex, interrelated, or multifaceted social processes, such as inter-firm relationships or inter-office politics, where quantitative evidence may be biased, inaccurate, or otherwise difficult to obtain. Second, they are often helpful for theory construction in areas with no or insufficient a priori theory. Third, they are also appropriate for studying context-specific, unique, or idiosyncratic events or processes. Fourth, interpretive research can also help uncover interesting and relevant research questions and issues for follow-up research.

At the same time, interpretive research also has its own set of challenges. First, this type of research tends to be more time and resource intensive than positivist research in data collection and analytic efforts. Too little data can lead to false or premature assumptions, while too much data may not be effectively processed by the researcher. Second, interpretive research requires well-trained researchers who are capable of seeing and interpreting complex social phenomenon from the perspectives of the embedded participants and reconciling the diverse perspectives of these participants, without injecting their personal biases or preconceptions into their inferences. Third, all participants or data sources may not be equally credible, unbiased, or knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest, or may have undisclosed political agendas, which may lead to misleading or false impressions. Inadequate trust between participants and researcher may hinder full and honest self-representation by participants, and such trust building takes time. It is the job of the interpretive researcher to

"see through the smoke" (hidden or biased agendas) and understand the true nature of the problem. Fourth, given the heavily contextualized nature of inferences drawn from interpretive research, such inferences do not lend themselves well to replicability or generalizability. Finally, interpretive research may sometimes fail to answer the research questions of interest or predict future behaviors.

Characteristics of Interpretive Research

All interpretive research must adhere to a common set of principles, as described below.

Naturalistic inquiry: Social phenomena must be studied within their natural setting. Because interpretive research assumes that social phenomena are situated within and cannot be isolated from their social context, interpretations of such phenomena must be grounded within their socio-historical context. This implies that contextual variables should be observed and considered in seeking explanations of a phenomenon of interest, even though context sensitivity may limit the generalizability of inferences.

Researcher as instrument: Researchers are often embedded within the social context that they are studying, and are considered part of the data collection instrument in that they must use their observational skills, their trust with the participants, and their ability to extract the correct information. Further, their personal insights, knowledge, and experiences of the social context is critical to accurately interpreting the phenomenon of interest. At the same time, researchers must be fully aware of their personal biases and preconceptions, and not let such biases interfere with their ability to present a fair and accurate portrayal of the phenomenon.

Interpretive analysis: Observations must be interpreted through the eyes of the participants embedded in the social context. Interpretation must occur at two levels. The first level involves viewing or experiencing the phenomenon from the subjective perspectives of the social participants. The second level is to understand the meaning of the participants' experiences in order to provide a "thick description" or a rich narrative story of the phenomenon of interest that can communicate why participants acted the way they did.

Use of expressive language: Documenting the verbal and non-verbal language of participants and the analysis of such language are integral components of interpretive analysis. The study must ensure that the story is viewed through the eyes of a person, and not a machine, and must depict the emotions and experiences of that person, so that readers can understand and relate to that person. Use of imageries, metaphors, sarcasm, and other figures of speech is very common in interpretive analysis.

Temporal nature: Interpretive research is often not concerned with searching for specific answers, but with understanding or "making sense of" a dynamic social process as it unfolds over time. Hence, such research requires an immersive involvement of the researcher at the study site for an extended period of time in order to capture the entire evolution of the phenomenon of interest.

Hermeneutic circle: Interpretive interpretation is an iterative process of moving back and forth from pieces of observations (text) to the entirety of the social phenomenon (context) to reconcile their apparent discord and to construct a theory that is consistent with the diverse subjective viewpoints and experiences of the embedded participants. Such iterations between the understanding/meaning of a phenomenon and observations must continue until "theoretical saturation" is reached, whereby any additional iteration does not yield any more insight into the phenomenon of interest.

Interpretive Data Collection

Data is collected in interpretive research using a variety of techniques. The most frequently used technique is interviews (face-to-face, telephone, or focus groups). Interview types and strategies are discussed in detail in a previous chapter on survey research. A second technique is observation . Observational techniques include direct observation , where the researcher is a neutral and passive external observer and is not involved in the phenomenon of interest (as in case research), and participant observation , where the researcher is an active participant in the phenomenon and her inputs or mere presence influence the phenomenon being studied (as in action research). A third technique is documentation , where external and internal documents, such as memos, electronic mails, annual reports, financial statements, newspaper articles, websites, may be used to cast further insight into the phenomenon of interest or to corroborate other forms of evidence.

Interpretive Research Designs

Case research . As discussed in the previous chapter, case research is an intensive longitudinal study of a phenomenon at one or more research sites for the purpose of deriving detailed, contextualized inferences and understanding the dynamic process underlying a phenomenon of interest. Case research is a unique research design in that it can be used in an interpretive manner to build theories or in a positivist manner to test theories. The previous chapter on case research discusses both techniques in depth and provides illustrative exemplars. Furthermore, the case researcher is a neutral observer (direct observation) in the social setting rather than an active participant (participant observation). As with any other interpretive approach, drawing meaningful inferences from case research depends heavily on the observational skills and integrative abilities of the researcher.

Action research . Action research is a qualitative but positivist research design aimed at theory testing rather than theory building (discussed in this chapter due to lack of a proper space). This is an interactive design that assumes that complex social phenomena are best understood by introducing changes, interventions, or “actions” into those phenomena and observing the outcomes of such actions on the phenomena of interest. In this method, the researcher is usually a consultant or an organizational member embedded into a social context (such as an organization), who initiates an action in response to a social problem, and examines how her action influences the phenomenon while also learning and generating insights about the relationship between the action and the phenomenon. Examples of actions may include organizational change programs, such as the introduction of new organizational processes, procedures, people, or technology or replacement of old ones, initiated with the goal of improving an organization’s performance or profitability in its business environment. The researcher’s choice of actions must be based on theory, which should explain why and how such actions may bring forth the desired social change. The theory is validated by the extent to which the chosen action is successful in remedying the targeted problem. Simultaneous problem solving and insight generation is the central feature that distinguishes action research from other research methods (which may not involve problem solving) and from consulting (which may not involve insight generation). Hence, action research is an excellent method for bridging research and practice.

Rigor in Interpretive Research

While positivist research employs a “reductionist” approach by simplifying social reality into parsimonious theories and laws, interpretive research attempts to interpret social reality through the subjective viewpoints of the embedded participants within the context where the reality is situated. Because interpretive research is based on different set of ontological and epistemological assumptions about social phenomenon than positivist research, the positivist notions of rigor, such as reliability, internal validity, and generalizability, do not apply in a similar manner. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) [16] provide an alternative set of criteria that can be used to judge the rigor of interpretive research.

Dependability. Interpretive research can be viewed as dependable or authentic if two researchers assessing the same phenomenon using the same set of evidence independently arrive at the same conclusions or the same researcher observing the same or a similar phenomenon at different times arrives at similar conclusions. This concept is similar to that of reliability in positivist research, with agreement between two independent researchers being similar to the notion of inter-rater reliability, and agreement between two observations of the same phenomenon by the same researcher akin to test -retest reliability. To ensure dependability, interpretive researchers must provide adequate details about their phenomenon of interest and the social context in which it is embedded so as to allow readers to independently authenticate their interpretive inferences.

Credibility. Interpretive research can be considered credible if readers find its inferences to be believable. This concept is akin to that of internal validity in functionalistic research. The credibility of interpretive research can be improved by providing evidence of the researcher's extended engagement in the field, by demonstrating data triangulation across subjects or data collection techniques, and by maintaining meticulous data management and analytic procedures, such as verbatim transcription of interviews, accurate records of contacts and interviews, and clear notes on theoretical and methodological decisions, that can allow an independent audit of data collection and analysis if needed.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings reported in interpretive research can be independently confirmed by others (typically, participants). This is similar to the notion of objectivity in functionalistic research. Since interpretive research rejects the notion of an objective reality, confirmability is demonstrated in terms of "inter-subjectivity", i.e., if the study's participants agree with the inferences derived by the researcher. For instance, if a study's participants generally agree with the inferences drawn by a researcher about a phenomenon of interest (based on a review of the research paper or report), then the findings can be viewed as confirmable.

Transferability. Transferability in interpretive research refers to the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other settings. This idea is similar to that of external validity in functionalistic research. The researcher must provide rich, detailed descriptions of the research context ("thick description") and thoroughly describe the structures, assumptions, and processes revealed from the data so that readers can independently assess whether and to what extent are the reported findings transferable to other settings.

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