27 Qualitative-Interpretive Methods in Policy Research

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The use of qualitative methods in policy research is not new. Academic scholars and policy analysts have for some years been venturing out into the "field" as ethnographers or participant-observers to study first-hand the experiences of legislators, implementors, agency clients, community members, and other policy-relevant stakeholders. Others have based qualitative studies on in-depth interviews with various policy actors; and still other studies draw on legislative, agency, and other documents.

What is new, however, in methodological circles is a greater attention to making the steps of such analyses more transparent. On the one hand, this makes it easier for students and others to learn how such studies are carried out. At the same time, such transparency enables critics and skeptics of the scientific standing of such research to see that they are not impressionistic, that they have regularized procedures, and that they can yield trustworthy analyses, although these procedures and standards may be—indeed, are—different from those used in other forms of research. Part of this transparency involves making clear that qualitative methods have a longstanding history of philosophical exploration and argumentation that supports their procedures and evidentiary claims at a conceptual level. It has become increasingly important to be explicit about what these philosophical groundings are, and so this chapter includes a brief summary of several of the central presuppositions and their ideational sources. Another part of this transparency involves attending quite carefully to the language used in talking about methodological concerns and methods procedures. This has led to a shift in many circles from talking about "qualitative" methods to a discourse of "interpretive" methods. This shift has taken place because of the so-called "interpretive turn" in the social sciences quite broadly (see, e.g., Rabinow and Sullivan 1979, 1985), but also because of the greater awareness of the philosophical presuppositions undergirding *all* research methods and an increased desire to ground methods discussions in their attendant methodologies.

The approach I sketch out here rests, then, on "taking language seriously" (to draw on Jay White's article and book titles; White 1992, 1999) and also on the very philosophical presuppositions that undergird these methods and methodologies. I begin with an explanation and defense of the interpretive turn, not only in conceptual terms but in methodological ones as well, as a more fitting name for this form of research. As this rests on philosophical argumentation, in the second section I summarize some of the main points from interpretive philosophies that inform interpretive methods. These suggest some of the central characteristics and themes of interpretive methods, including some of the central issues raised today in methodological discussions. Entire chapters and volumes have been written about these several interpretive methods. Here, I will sketch out the entailments of interpretive methods for accessing or generating data. The chapter concludes with very brief notes on some of the interpretive methods used in analyzing such data in the context of policy research. There are many more than I have space for here, and the reader is encouraged to use the references to pursue these.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? INTERPRETIVE METHODS

Researchers in many fields who use those methods traditionally called "qualitative"—field research methods such as participant-observation and analytic methods such as frame analysis or ethnomethodology—are increasingly using a different umbrella term to refer to them: "interpretive." The reasons are both historical and contemporary, having to do with the origins of the term qualitative and current issues in the philosophy of science, including social science.

The language of qualitative methods came into being to distinguish field research methods, such as those developed prominently in Chicago School sociology and anthropology from the 1930s to 1960s, from the survey research design and statistical methods being developed at the same time, notably at Columbia University and later at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. As the latter were designated "quantitative" methods, the former must, by the logic of language and category construction, be "qualitative." Qualitative research, then, was that research that drew on one or more of three methods for gathering, accessing or generating data: observing, with whatever degree of participating; interviewing in a conversational mode; and the close reading of topic-relevant documents.[1]

One difficulty with the qualitative-quantitative nomenclature is that the category structure sets up an opposition that does not hold. "Qualitative" researchers count things (although what they do with numbers, how they treat them analytically, is characteristically quite different from the ways that quantitative researchers treat them; see, e.g., Gusfield 1976, 1981); "quantitative" researchers interpret their data. And so the distinction is both erroneous and misleading.

Two other differences further complicate the two-part category structure. First, its focus on numeracy diverts attention from underlying ontological and epistemological differences that are far more significant. Different methods presume different "reality statuses" for the topic of research. A simplistic example would be that tables, chairs, and other office furniture, which one can physically touch, have a different ontological standing than, say, the organization whose offices they furnish—something that might matter, for instance, in analyses from different perspectives of space planning for that organization (which, as a concept, denotes more than its material reality). Different reality statuses in turn presume different ways of knowing and different rules of evidence (that supports the "truth claims" of the analysis) or criteria for assessing its trustworthiness. An analysis of the allocation of office space and furnishings to members at various levels of the organization requires a different kind of "know-ability" than an assessment of the meanings of those allocations to those members and their interpretations of the differences. The qualitative-quantitative terminology has become a shorthand proxy for referring to philosophical differences between methods informed by interpretive philosophies and those informed by logical positivism and its emendations. This masking, through the qual/quant language of the category structure, of ontological and epistemological presuppositions undergirding methodological debates and methods procedures exacerbates the lack of attention to philosophical presuppositions common in the way methods courses are typically taught—that is, as a set of tools divorced from any underlying assumptions.[2]

Second, under pressure to meet the evaluative standards of quantitative methods—the validity and reliability criteria that are grounded in the presuppositions of logical positivism—some qualitative researchers are increasingly doing work designed to resemble more closely the characteristics

1. Examples of such qualitative studies include many that focused on bureaucracies, such as Blau 1953, Gouldner 1954; Kaufman 1960, Selznick 1949, or on workers and work practices, such as Becker et al. 1961; Dalton 1959.

2. Note that "pre"suppositions are not prior in time but in logic. Most researchers do not first decide what their ideas about reality and knowledge are. It is far more common to simply begin with a research puzzle and proceed to a research design. What is "prior" precedes in the sense of logic: research designs presume certain ideas about or attitudes toward ontological status and epistemological possibilities. These are embedded in research methods.

of large "n" research and to conform more to the research processes associated with quantitative methods. "Qualitative" research looks less and less like the traditional field research methods associated with that term. Such efforts include, for example, the adoption of computer programs (such as NU˙DIST or Atlas-Ti) to "process" words and phrases from interview and field notes or focus groups, as well as highly structured interviews, Q-sort and other techniques, rather than the ethnographic, participant-observer, ethnomethodological, semiotic, narrative, and other approaches that are the hallmarks of qualitative methods.[3] The social sciences, including policy studies, are increasingly characterized by a tripartite methods categorization: quantitative, qualitative-positivist, and qualitative-interpretive. The distinction is made clearer when one considers the presuppositional grounding that informs the methods used in this latter category.

INTERPRETIVE METHODOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

The Continental philosophies of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and critical theory developed in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century engaged some of the same questions that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century positivist philosophies did: what is the character of human social reality, as compared with the ontological status of the physical or natural world? And, in light of that reality status, how can aspects of the human social world be known in a "scientific" fashion—again, as compared with the ability to know something, with any degree of certainty, about the physical or natural world? Early nineteenth-century positivist philosophers advanced the argument that the social world should be know-able in the same way that planetary motion and physical mass, for example, could be known: through systematic application of human reason, restricted by the later logical positivist philosophers to sense-based observation alone. Such study should yield principles or "laws" of human behavior that were not only discoverable, but universal. Observation from a vantage point external to the subject of study—an Archimedean point or "God's-eye view" (see, e.g., Harding 1988)—was not only desirable; it was deemed possible.[4]

From the perspective of the interpretive philosophers, however—those Continental philosophers and their American counterparts in symbolic interactionism, pragmatism, and the later ethnomethodology—the human social world is different in significant ways from the world of nature and physical objects and forces. One difference is the centrality of meaning-making to human life. A second is that that meaning-making of lived experience—the interpretive processes through which one generates meaning and is able to understand another's meaning—is highly context-specific. From this perspective, the researcher cannot stand outside the subject of study: more than just the five senses is involved in interpreting people's acts, the language they employ, and the objects they create and use; objectivity is not possible—from this perspective, general laws look more like a "view from nowhere" (Nagel 1986; see also Haraway 1988, Harding 1993), as situational sense-making draws on prior knowledge and builds on intersubjective understanding.

Interpretive researchers, then, do not feel the need to transform words into numbers for analysis. This is the most immediately visible characteristic of interpretive methods: they are word-based, from data "collection" instruments to data analysis tools to research report formats and contents. Interpretive researchers stick close to the character of the data they are encountering: as policy-relevant actors deliberate through words, whether written or oral (or, for that matter, nonverbal), researchers use those words as their data in seeing meanings and sources of meanings. When those actors use numbers, as in counting the numbers of drivers arrested for driving drunk (Gusfield 1981), researchers read those numbers as sources of meaning (for instance, to explore category-construction). This

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3. For further discussion of these points and for illustrations of these and other interpretive methods beyond what is discussed in this chapter, see, e.g., Prasad 2005 and Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006.
4. This has come to be one understanding of "objectivity." For a critique of that understanding, see, e.g., Bernstein 1983, Hawkesworth 2006, Yanow 2006a.

makes interpretive methods particularly suitable for argumentative, deliberative, and other such approaches to policy research (e.g., Fischer and Forester 1993, Hajer and Wagenaar 2003).

Because they are ontologically constructivist (rather than realist) and epistemologically interpretivist (rather than objectivist), interpretive researchers are attuned to the ways in which their own presence might, in many ways, potentially affect what they are learning in their research. Unlike survey researchers, however, who exert efforts in questionnaire design and administration to minimize these so-called "interviewer effects," interpretive researchers increasingly deny the possibility that interviewers or participants or, in fact, readers can be nonimpacting in this way. Instead—and here is a second hallmark of interpretive research—interpretive methodologists call for heightened degrees of reflexivity on the part of the researcher: explicit attention to the ways in which family background, personality, education, training, and other experience might well shape who and what the researcher is able to access, as well as the ways in which he makes sense of the generated data. This is the enactment of the phenomenological argument that selves are shaped by prior experiences, which in turn shape perception and understanding. It is an argument that has also been advanced in feminist theories and race-ethnic studies concerning "standpoint" perspectives (see Hartsock 1987). Contemporary research reports are increasingly expected to include reflexive accounts of these "standpoints" and their role in shaping interpretations.

A related implication of taking a context-specific view "from somewhere" that denies the possibility of "discovering" generalizable, universal laws in policy research is the potential for multiplicity of meaning, depending on context and phenomenological experience. A hermeneutic argument, this goes beyond the interpretation of biblical texts—its historical antecedent—to the interpretation of other sorts of texts (e.g., policy documents) and other sorts of physical artifacts (e.g., agency buildings), as well as to human acts (e.g., legislating or implementing)—what Taylor (1971) called "text analogues" (see also Ricoeur 1971), to which we might also add nonverbal behaviors. It posits a representational—a symbolic—relationship between human artifactual creations and the values, beliefs, and sentiments that comprise their underlying meanings. Central to this position is an appreciation for the ambiguities that may, and often do, especially in policy arenas, arise from multiple interpretations of the same artifacts—especially as the reasons for such interpretational differences are rarely made explicit in everyday policy discourse. This is, or can be, the researcher's task.[5]

For this reason, among others, interpretive researchers insist on grounding analytic inferences in the clear and detailed enumeration of acts, of interview language, and of objects necessary for supporting inferences. Such grounding is one of the ways in which interpretive researchers argue for the evidentiary bases for their truth claims. It is why narrative reports often read like novels—a third hallmark: without such detailed grounding, reports could read like imaginative flights of fancy. This is also why interpretive research data often cannot be condensed in tables, leading to reports that are typically longer than those based on quantitative data that can be summarily presented in such a fashion. (This acceptance of the social realities of multiple meanings is also the reason that interpretive policy analysts include the study of underlying values in their research, negating the

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5. I develop the argument about symbolic relationships further in Yanow (2000, ch. 1). I disagree with those who claim that a hermeneutic approach requires, per se, a realist approach to texts and text analogues, a point discussed in Hendriks (2005b: 25). For those of us who follow a "reader-response" approach to textual meaning, meaning does not necessarily reside in the text itself, nor does it reside necessarily in the author's intended meaning—analogous in the policy world to legislators' intent. A phenomenological hermeneutics—the point I have sought to articulate in my work—sees meaning also in readers' responses to texts, and it can be seen as well as emerging out of an interaction among these three (text, author, reader; see, e.g., Iser 1989). This position is well suited for the analysis of policies because of its appreciation for the ambiguities of lived experience and its interpretation.

fact-value dichotomy that has held sway in some other areas of policy analysis.[6])

These characteristics—word-based methods and writing, researcher reflexivity, and the exploration of multiple meanings and their ambiguities, especially in policy contexts in which contention over the policy issue under study is common—are three of the central hallmarks of interpretive research, informed by a constructivist ontology, an interpretivist epistemology, and other attendant philosophical presuppositions. These presuppositions are enacted in methods of generating and analyzing data.

METHODS OF GENERATING DATA

Terminology comes into play again in talking about what in methods texts has customarily been termed "collecting" or "gathering" data. This language suggests that the data are just lying around waiting to be found and assembled and brought back for analysis, much like a botanist might collect or gather specimens to mount in the lab. Indeed, even the words "datum/data" in their literal meanings denote things that are given, underscoring the positivist notion that the researcher can stand outside the research setting and its details and discover (or uncover) their characteristics objectively.

From an interpretive perspective, by contrast, the evidentiary material that the researcher analyzes is constructed by participants in the event or setting being studied. To the extent that the researcher herself is seen as a participant, one might even speak of the co-construction or co-generation of evidence. This language draws on the social constructionist argument that is central to phenomenology (see, e.g., Schütz 1962; Berger and Luckmann 1966). Methods of generating data are threefold: observing, interviewing, reading. Interpretive research typically draws on one or more of these three.

1. OBSERVING

Observing, with whatever degree of participation in the setting, acts, and events being observed, is the heart of participant-observer and ethnographic research. These methods entail more than just a set of tools; they rest on what might be called, in both cases, an "ethnographic sensibility" (Pader 2006). This means an intention to understand acts and actors as much as possible from within their own frame of reference, their own sense-making of the situation. In ways similar to those articulated by Erving Goffman (1959) concerning symbolic interactionism and Harold Garfinkel (1977) concerning ethnomethodology, the researcher seeks to understand the everyday, common sense, largely unarticulated, yet tacitly known "rules" that members of the situation have mastered and which enable them to navigate the interactions and settings that comprise their daily lives.

In the context of housing policy, for example, and specifically of occupancy rates, Ellen Pader's experience as a guest in the home of a Mexican family opened her eyes to the fact that the lived experience of "crowding"—the number of bodies occupying a given square footage of domestic space—is not universal. Yet United States housing policy sets occupancy rates that disallow the person:space ratios common in other parts of the world, even when immigrants to the United States from those places would themselves be more comfortable at the higher ratios familiar from their countries of origin. Enforcement of lower ratios mandated by law can, in her view, be discriminatory. It was her first-hand observation of different ways of constructing space and its meanings that led her to her analyses of these policies (see, e.g, Pader 1994, 1998, 2002, 2006).

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6. For a critique of the fact-value dichotomy, see Rein (1976). For a critique of other ways of treating that dichotomy, see Hawkesworth (1988).

Herbert Gans (1976) makes the important point that participant-observation can entail varying degrees of participation. Ranging these along a continuum, we have at one end what most would probably consider the typical participant-observer role: much like Pader participating in the Mexican household, sleeping in the same bed with the daughters, the researcher assumes a situation-specific role and acts out of the requirements of that role. One might take on the role, for instance, of community organizer or agency department head (Yanow 1996) to study policy implementation at the local level. Gans notes, however, that it is also possible to be a participant-observer in the explicit or public role of researcher, rather than in an "insider" role. Here, the emphasis is more on "observer" than on "participant," although the researcher is present on site, accompanying policy-relevant actors as they attend to daily tasks and so on, according to the needs of the study. When called upon to act, the researcher does so in keeping with her research role, rather than her member role. Ingersoll and Adams' (1992) study of the Washington State Ferry system is an example of extended observation where the researchers mingled their observational roles as researchers with participation as system riders. Lin's (2000) comparative analysis of state prisons and criminal justice policy is another example of a study that drew on on-site observation, in which she was clearly in a researcher's role rather than that of either guard or prisoner.

All along this continuum, the researcher is ever-mindful of his researcher role, even in a situational role, as Gans stresses, even when constrained from acting as a researcher by the demands of his member role. This casts the researcher in an "undercover" role, which raises the classic questions of ethical research practice connected to disguised identity (that is, is it ethical for the researcher to disguise the fact that she is conducting research?). Different researchers take different positions on this question.[7]

2. INTERVIEWING

Interpretive interviewing bears a family resemblance to common conversation, although the interviewer typically takes a more active role in directing the trajectory of the conversation than, say, a friend or family member might. As with participant-observation or ethnographic research, the interpretive interviewer is interested in understanding how those he is talking to make sense of their lived experiences. This enacts a phenomenological position. Unlike the survey researcher, whose training stipulates that she not depart from the text of the written questions—neither in tone of voice nor delivery nor in wording or question order—the interpretive researcher typically seeks to draw the speaker out, much as one would a conversational partner, in order to gain further understanding of the terms being used or the perspective being articulated. Frederic Schaffer's "ordinary language interviewing" (2006) is an example. He sought to understand how those he spoke with in Senegal made sense of the concept of "democracy" (Schaffer 1998): was it, in their eyes and in their experiences, the same thing that Americans call democracy, or did it have a particular, local coloration? He shapes his follow-up questions to respond to what he has just been told or, at times, to clarify a point made earlier in the conversation (see Schaffer 2006).

Policy-related research often draws on interviews, especially of legislators or agency executives. Yet interviewing need not be restricted to "elites" (see, e.g., Soss 2006, Walsh 2004). From an interpretive research perspective, especially one informed by critical theory, non-elite actors are also seen as playing a role in shaping policies, especially in rejecting top-down acts such as in policy implementation; and the researcher would want to understand their perspectives as well. Jeanette Hoffman (1995), for instance, found that technology policy was determined not only by

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7. In institution-based research in the United States where the investigator is required to comply with institutional review boards'(IRB) interpretations of protection of human subjects regulations, this question might also arise in the context of whether lack of such disclosure might potentialy harm research "subjects." There are many more questions about ethical practices and about IRB procedures than I can address in this chapter. See, e.g., Katz (2004).

policy-makers, but also in a complex interaction that included members of technology firms and university researchers.

Interviewing can be the sole source of data for an interpretive study. It can also be the "talk" part of a participant-observer or ethnographic study. However, if the researcher observes, say, office activities before, during, and after conducting interviews, that would not commonly be considered generating ethnographic observational data. The latter requires more systematicity to provide trustworthy evidence: "being there" through prolonged observation over time and space, in various circumstances (e.g., times of day, days of the week, time of year, level or part of the organization), depending on how these bear on the research question.

3. READING DOCUMENTS

The third source of interpretive data is documents of various kinds, depending on the research topic. These can be legislative records, bills and their marked-up drafts, notes on meetings, personal diaries, daily calendars, agency memos, annual reports, correspondence, and so on. For historical data, the researcher might also read back issues of newspapers; depending on the research question, editorial columns might constitute data alongside reportage. Rather than reading these as event evidence, they might be read for a sense of the times—of how people responded at that time to particular events or ideas. The focus is on meaning-making. One is, in a way, interrogating the written record when one was not or could not be present oneself. Phyllis Chock's (1995) study of Congressional "talk" during debates on immigration policy is an example of such usage of legislative records. By examining the written record of spoken language, she was able to analyze the ways in which legislators' and expert witnesses' embedded ideas about immigrants reflected and shaped immigration reform and policy contentions.

Document reading can also be part of an observational study or an interview-based project. Documents can provide background information prior to designing the research project, for example, or prior to conducting interviews. They may corroborate observational and interview data—or they may refute them, in which case the researcher is "armed" with evidence that can be used to clarify or, perhaps, to challenge what he is being told, a role that observational data may also play.

METHODS OF ANALYZING DATA

Once one has data in hand, so to speak, how might one analyze them interpretively? Analysis and data generation are not so clearly separable—analysis begins, in fact, with the very design of the research project, and fieldwork, deskwork, and textwork (the "writing up") are intertwined; but in a short chapter, it is easier to treat them as if they were temporally distinct.

There is a vast array of interpretive methods of analysis, among them action research (or participatory action research), case study analysis (either single or explicitly comparative), category analysis, content analysis (word-based, not incidence rate counts), conversational analysis, discourse analysis, dramaturgical analysis, ethnomethodology, frame (-reflective) analysis, genealogy, grounded theory, life histories, metaphor analysis, myth analysis, narrative analysis (of various sorts), poststructural analysis, science studies, semiotics, space analysis, story-telling analysis, and value-critical analysis. Some of these have been drawn on in policy research more than others, perhaps for reasons of familiarity rather than anything else (although one might argue that the subjects of policy studies are marked by a degree of contention that lends themselves to some methods, such as frame or value-critical analysis, more than others). Here, I will touch on a few of these as exemplars.

1. FRAME OR VALUE-CRITICAL AANALYSIS

Interviewing, sometimes together with observing (e.g., meetings, public hearings) and document analysis, lends itself to frame analysis or value-critical analysis (see, e.g., Linder 1995; Schmidt 2000, 2006; Schon and Rein 1994; Swaffield 1998; see also Luker 1984). Here, the researcher identifies two or more interpretive communities (also called communities of meaning, communities of practice, speech or discourse communities, etc.) and the language each uses to "frame" the policy issue, typically in conflicting ways. Analysis consists of identifying the values underlying the respective frames. Undertaken in an action research mode, this analysis might also suggest interventions to enable each interpretive community to understand why the other reasons in the way that it does and possibly to broker a mediated resolution to the conflict. Graham Allison's (1971) multiple-lens study of the Cuban missile crisis was an earlier version of this kind of research. It is an approach that has been taken up in organizational studies at a theoretical level (see, e.g., Morgan 1986 or Bolman and Deal 1991). I have extended the interventionist implications of this approach also to implementation analysis (Yanow 1987).

2. STORY-TELLING ANALYSIS

Drawing on an interesting combination of interviewing with directed diary writing, Steven Maynard-Moody and Michael Musheno (2003) and their colleagues have developed a method of accessing stories told by front-line workers concerning their actions in implementing public policies. Michael Lipsky's (1980), Jeffrey Prottas' (1979), and Richard Weatherly's (1979) first-generation studies of workers at the front lines themselves rested on intimate familiarity with what teachers, social workers, police officers, and others actually do in the field—how they interact with clients, students, and so on—generated through some combination of observing people in action and talking with workers and others.

3. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Other researchers see narrative analysis as distinct from story analysis. Carolyn Hendriks (2005a), for example, treats narratives as the overall development of a line of argument, rather than as stories in the way used by Maynard-Moody and Musheno—narratives with plot lines that have beginnings, middles, and ends. Emery Roe's (1993) theory of narrative policy analysis draws on a stream of literary theory that uses "counter-narratives" as ways of making the line of argument clearer, through juxtaposing the narrative argument with a contrasting hypothetical. Tineke Abma (1999) has treated narrative analysis in a number of ways in the context of program evaluations. What all of these have in common is a focus on the importance of attending to policy-relevant actors' language in discerning the character of disputes and the potentials for interpretation.

4. DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS

Maarten Hajer (2005) draws on the approach developed by the literary theorist Kenneth Burke for analyzing dramas. His analytic pentad situates dramatic action in the context of its setting, looking also at the actors in question, their acts, and their agency and purpose (Burke 1945). This provides a systematic framework for the analysis of policy "acts," which Hajer has extended most recently to the analysis of events surrounding the murder of the Dutch public figure Theo van Gogh. Burke's

theory also suggests a systematic approach to the analysis of policy and organizational settings and their spatial meanings (Yanow 2000, 2006b).

5. CATEGORY ANALYSIS

One of the analytic steps that characterizes the work of interpretive researchers is the impulse to, in the words of some, "destabilize" received or commonplace meanings. Others talk about this using the language of "deconstruction": accepted policy meanings are deconstructed in the sense that the typically unspoken, commonsense assumptions built in to them are named and subjected to inquiry. One of the most common sets of assumptions are those embedded in policy issue categories, such as classifications of welfare recipients or prisoners, or of school children and their learning levels. Analyzing the language and structure of these categories along with practices of category-making is another area of interpretive method. As creating categories for administrative purposes through policy-making is a common state activity, category analysis is especially useful in policy research. I have developed one approach to category analysis and used it in the context of race-ethnic policy and administrative practices, such as those used in hospitals, census-taking, and employment (Yanow 2003).

There are many more forms of interpretive (qualitative) approaches to policy research than there is space to discuss here. The references point to some of these, as well as to primary and secondary sources for their theoretical and philosophical background. Additional forms will continue to be developed as more and more policy researchers discover the utility of analyses grounded in the actual lived experiences of policy-relevant actors and in the meanings they make of the policies that engage and affect their lives.

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28 Qualitative Research and Public Policy

Alan R. Sadovnik

Over the past two decades, the use of qualitative research in the social sciences has increased significantly (Riehl 2001). Although quantitative methodologies remain the dominant paradigm in policy research and recent federal policy initiatives privileging experimental designs and randomized field trials as the gold standard for evaluation research have bolstered its position, qualitative methods remain an important tool for policy researchers (Maxwell 2004; Chatterji 2005). The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the evolution of qualitative research, its strengths and weaknesses, how it differs from quantitative research, and its important contributions to public policy research, especially in educational research. Based upon this discussion, I will argue that qualitative research should be part of any mixed-method approach to policy research.

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Qualitative research involves research that uses observational, communicative, and documentary methods in natural settings (Riehl 2001, 116) in an effort to understand the social world. According to Denzin and Lincoln, it is

> multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical methods—case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments in individuals' lives. (1994, 2)

Some qualitative researchers have remained squarely in the scientific tradition of post-positivism: insisting on objectivity, rigorous research design, and examining causality (Maxwell 2004). Others are more rooted within interpretive traditions, including symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, hermeneutics, postmodernism, feminism, critical theory, and cultural studies (Riehl 2001, 116) and in varying degrees reject post-positivist notions of scientific rigor.

HISTORY OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Logical positivism has been the foundation for social science methods since the nineteenth century. From Comte's introduction of a positive science of society, later to be termed positivism, to Durkheim's codification of positivist empiricism in his classic *The Rules of Sociological Method*, quantitative methods dominated social science, especially in the United States (Denzin and Lincoln

1994, 1–17). However, there has been a rich, concurrent qualitative tradition, beginning with cultural anthropology and institutionalized in sociology by the Chicago School in the 1920s–1940s (Vidich and Lyman 1994, 23–59).

The Chicago School sociologists, such as Robert Park, Ernest W. Burgess, W.I. Thomas and Louis Wirth produced a series of ethnographic studies on Chicago neighborhoods that was part of the larger project of producing an ecological theory of urban life. These sociologists moved away from the "missionary" perspective of earlier sociologists such as Albion Small and early cultural anthropologists seeking to bring a Christian attitude to the study of "primitive" cultures. The Chicago School made ethnographic studies an important feature of American sociology (Vidich and Lyman 1994, 32–35).

Working within this tradition, William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943, 1955, 1981) about Italian Americans living in the North End of Boston introduced participant observation as an important part of ethnography. Whyte lived in the neighborhood, interacted daily with his "Cornerville" boys and became a subject of his own study. Like his mentors in Chicago's Sociology Department, Whyte's work was "initially motivated by a sense of moral responsibility to up-lift the slum-dwelling masses," but became the model for future ethnographic research in which the researcher became part of the group he was studying. Such immersion required ethnographers to move back and forth between their roles as "objective" observers and their roles as "subjective" participants (Vidich and Lyman 1994, 34).

Some Chicago School researchers, like Park, worked from an assimilationist model, with their works exploring how to assimilate new immigrants into the urban Protestant middle class culture. Others like Hollingshead (1949/1961) celebrated nineteenth-century small town values and relied on Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic societies and Tonnie's distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. Neither model, however, could account for the racism within American society and the opposition to the assimilation of African Americans into mainstream culture. Another Chicago trained sociologist, African-American E. Franklin Frazier produced a series of works (1937a, 1937b, 1957) that "stands apart, not only because it points to the exclusion of blacks from the American ideal of brotherhood and the then-emerging civic otherhood, but also because its research orientation drew on the life histories of his subjects and his own experience (Vidich and Lyman 1994, 34).

From World War II to the present, American sociology moved away from the assimilationist model to a more pluralist one, with ethnographies rejecting a linear pattern of the integration of immigrants and African Americans into white, middle-class culture. Recent works such as Portes and Rumbaut's *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (2001) provides much more nuanced ethnographic accounts of the tensions between assimilation and separation and introduces the term "segmented assimilation" to reject a linear model of cultural integration. What *Legacies* has in common with earlier ethnographic accounts is its rich descriptions of immigrant life and an understanding of the subjective perspectives of individuals and groups, the hallmark of qualitative research.

From the early twentieth century, qualitative research has been influenced by interpretive and phenomenological paradigms in the social sciences (Giddens 1975). From the symbolic interactionism of G.H. Mead and Herbert Blumer with its emphasis on the social construction of reality, to the sociological analysis of everyday life by Erving Goffman (1961a, 1961b, 1963a, 1963b, 1967) and ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (1967), qualitative researchers sought to uncover the contextual use of symbols, such as language and dress and the problematic nature of meanings (Collins 1975; Sadovnik 1994). These micro-sociologies of everyday discourse and interactions laid bare the ways in which social actors constructed meaning in the context of social interactions and how everyday life is often confused, problematic and uncertain. When combined with more macro-structural approaches, these sociologies of everyday life became powerful analyses of social order and change (Collins 1975, 2005).

From the 1980s to the present, qualitative research has been heavily influenced by postmodernism. Postmodernism developed out of a profound dissatisfaction with the modernist project of enlightenment and reason. Beginning with the poststructural writings of Jacques Derrida (1973, 1981, 1982) and Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1984), social theorists, particularly in France, questioned the appropriateness of modernist categories for understanding what they saw as a postmodern world, a world that transcended the economic and social relations of the industrial world that modernist thought had sought to understand. In particular, the work of Jean Francois Lyotard (1982, 1984) rejected the Marxist perspective and the Enlightenment and modernist assumptions underlying Marxist theory and sought to create a different theory for the late twentieth century.

There is a vast body of literature on the definition of postmodernist theory (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Giroux 1991; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1982, 1992; Jencks 1987; Lyotard 1984), as well as a growing body of literature on postmodern approaches to education (Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Cherryholmes 1988; Doll 1989; Ellsworth 1989; Giroux 1988, 1991; Lather 1989; McLaren 1986, 1991; McLaren and Hammer 1989; Wexler 1987).

It is important to begin by defining modernist social theory. In both sociology and philosophy, modernist theory traces its intellectual heritage to the Enlightenment. From the classical sociological theory of Marx (1971), Marx and Engels (1947), Weber (1978), and Durkheim (1938/1977, 1947), to the pragmatist philosophy of Dewey (1916, 1927/1984), and to the social theory of Jürgen Habermas (1979, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1987), what is usually referred to as modernist theories had a number of things in common. First, they believed in progress through science and technology, even if they were skeptical of positivist social science. Second, they emphasized the Enlightenment belief in reason. And third, they stressed Enlightenment principles such as equality, liberty, and justice.

Postmodernist thought consists of many interrelated themes. First, postmodernism insists on what Lyotard (1984) has labeled the rejection of all metanarratives. By this, Lyotard meant that modernist preoccupation with grand, total, or all-encompassing explanations of the world need to be replaced by localized and particular theories. Second, postmodernism stresses the necessary connection between theory and practice as a corrective to the separation of them in much modernist thought. Third, postmodernism stresses the democratic response to authoritarianism and totalitarianism. In particular, Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux (1991), Giroux (1991), and Peter McLaren and R. Hammer (1989) call for a democratic, emancipatory, and antitotalitarian theory and practice, with schools seen as sites for democratic transformation. Fourth, postmodernism sees modernist thought as Eurocentric and patriarchal. Giroux (1991), Patricia Lather (1991), Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989), and others provide an important critique of the racism and sexism in some modernist writings and of the failure of modernism to address the interests of women and people of color. Fifth, postmodernist theorists believe that all social and political discourses are related to structures of power and domination. Sixth, postmodernism stresses what N. Burbules and S. Rice (1991) term "dialogue across differences." Recognizing the particular and local nature of knowledge, postmodern theorists call for the attempt to work through differences rather than to see them as hopelessly irreconcilable. Thus, postmodern theories of education call for teachers and students to explore the differences between what may seem like inherently contradictory positions in an effort to achieve understanding, respect, and change.

In qualitative research the works of Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005) have influenced what has been termed the postmodern turn. Rejecting the modernist approaches of earlier qualitative researchers such as Howard Becker, whose *Boys in White* (Becker 1961/1976), applied rigorous scientific methods of quantitative research to qualitative analysis, postmodernists rejected the principles of logical positivism and crossed theoretical and methodological boundaries. These researchers produced small case studies, celebrated stories and narratives, and questioned the possibility of objectivity. These researchers often blurred the lines between social science and literature, with traditional methodological concerns with objectivity, sample size, and reliability and validity rejected as Eurocentric and oppressive (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1998; Lather 1989,

1991). Sadovnik (1995) provides a critique of postmodern research in education, arguing that they often lack empirical evidence to support their claims. Nonetheless, in the last decade they have increasingly become an important school of qualitative research.

Insufficient empirical evidence is certainly a problem for policy research, where policy makers rely on sound empirical findings to influence policy. Despite the problems with much postmodern research, there remains a significant body of qualitative research that is methodologically sound and is important for policy research. Riehl (2001, 117) argues that there have been numerous important qualitative studies in the sociology of education that have influenced policy in a number of areas, including studies of inequality and the differential effects of schooling on student achievement, schooling and socialization, schools as social organizations, and policy issues in education.

THE NATURE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research is based on what sociologists term social constructionism and interpretivism. Unlike quantitative research, which is usually deductive (theory testing), qualitative research is usually inductive (theory construction). Social scientists do not simply discover or find knowledge; they are not detached from the world they are researching. Rather, they actively construct knowledge by inventing tools and instruments to collect and produce data. These tools and instruments are constantly renewed and revised. Social scientists formulate concepts to make interpretations of the data. The language coined to interpret data is distinguished from everyday talk, but also enters everyday talk. As concepts enter everyday talk they shape everyday practices and activities. There are a number of different forms of constructionism:

- Weak Constructionism: "Scientific knowledge is in part the product of processes of social negotiation without claiming that such knowledge is *only* a matter of social negotiation." This position avoids the relativist view that any interpretation is as good as another (Schwandt 2000, 199).
- Strong Constructionism: "Radical social constructionists ... argue that knowledge is the product of social processes and that all statements of the true, the rational, and the good are the products of various particular communities of interpreters and thus to be regarded with suspicion" (ibid., 199).

Interpretivism views human action as inherently meaningful and therefore qualitative researchers interpret the subjective meaning of action (grasping the actor's beliefs, desires, etc.) from an objective manner. Within this context, understanding is an intellectual process whereby the researcher (the inquirer as subject) gains knowledge about an object (the meaning of human action). Researchers refer to the hermeneutic circle of understanding which is "object oriented": it directs the researcher to the texts, institutions, practices or norms of life that are the object of inquiry. No reference is made to the researcher (Schwandt 2000).

A more radical branch of interpretivism is derived from philosophical hermeneutics, which is radical departure from other interpretivist methods. This perspective challenges the Cartesian binary or dichotomy between the inquirer (subject) and the object of inquiry (research object) and argues that:

- research knowledge cannot simply reproduce the meanings or understandings of the empirical world without taking into account the researchers' biases;
- understanding is something that is *produced* in the dialogue of research;

- a naive realism or objectivism is opposed with respect to meaning and endorses the position that there is never a finally correct interpretation;
- meaning is negotiated. (Schwandt 2000, as cited in Singh 2005)

Based upon the view that reality is socially constructed and negotiated, qualitative researchers attempt to uncover this situated, contextual, and changing nature of reality. In order to do this, qualitative researchers use a variety of methodological approaches and sampling techniques.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography refers to an in-depth study of a group of people or individuals in their or his context. It is both descriptive and interpretive, providing an insider view of the subjects. This includes what is called an emic view, the view of the insiders of themselves, and an etic view, the view of the outsiders of the culture. The ethnographic method includes the following:

- Selection of the group/site
- Gaining entrance
- Identification of area of interest
- Immersion in the context
- Gaining informants
- Data gathering (observations, interviews, artifacts)
- Data analysis and theory development—intermittent with collection—"thick description"
- Avoidance of theoretical preconceptions. (Singh 2005)

ACTION RESEARCH

This type of qualitative method is aimed at improving a certain practice, organizational context or a way of life. Action research is characterized by the following:

- It understands practice as a social phenomenon;
- It involves the people within the practice in the research process—it is participatory;
- It involves people working collaboratively with each other and with people from the outside;
- It is critical—asks why, why not, whose voice is being heard, and whose interests are being served;
- Aims at empowering people inside the practice. (Singh 2005)

Researchers who want to directly influence the practice within organizations most often use action research. For example, educational researchers often conduct action research with teachers and principals in schools in order to discover what works and what does not work and to collaboratively implement organizational change. From a positivist standpoint, such a priori political goals violate the objective norms of science and make the researcher part of the processes under investigation. Action researchers reject this stance of objectivity and argue that the purpose of research is to help improve the organizations under investigation. Although action research has become an important tool for policy research, it remains controversial.

Case Study

A case study is a holistic, in-depth investigation that uses multiple sources of data that can be either quantitative or qualitative. There are three types of case studies: *Exploratory*, *Explanatory*, and *Descriptive.* The researcher selects cases for either intrinsic or instrumental reasons; it can be different from ethnography because it does not necessarily aim to see the emic view and different from action research because it does not necessarily aim to change a practice or involve the people from the inside (Singh 2005).

Grounded Research

Based on the grounded theory of Strauss and Glaser (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), the general goal of grounded theory research is to construct theories in order to understand phenomena. Its main contribution is in generating theory from data in a systematic way—theory grounded in the data. Using the process of analytic induction, grounded theory research examines cases in detail and continues to build theory from the bottom up—based on observations of particular data. In the process of examining these cases over time, the researcher continually refines and develops new theories to explain the observed phenomena.

These types of qualitative approaches involve a number of different methods, some or all of which can be used in a given study. These include interviews, focus group interviews, observation (participant and non-participant), archival and content analysis.

Interviews may be conducted face-to-face, by e-mail, or telephone and may be informal, semi-structured, or formal, structured interviews. They are sometimes audiotaped and then carefully transcribed. These transcripts can be analyzed using a number of different qualitative software packages, which organize the data according to a number of themes.

A selected group of individuals may be interviewed on a common topic; the group dynamics provide valuable information. These focus groups are often organized around a topic, scenario, or dilemma. Although focus groups can provide the interviewer with important insights, they can also be manipulated by the presence of a strong personality in the group. Skilled focus group interviewers have to manage the group dynamics carefully.

Observation may be participant observation or non-participant observation. In participant observation, the researcher becomes a part of the context he/she is studying. For example, in *Street Corner Society*, William Foote Whyte lived in the North End of Boston and became a member of the group he was studying. In *Home Advantage*, Annette Lareau served as a teaching assistant in the schools she was studying. The purpose of such immersion is to allow the researcher to become part of the culture and to understand the subjective perception of members. The danger is that participant observers can lose their objectivity or begin to see the world as members rather than researchers.

Non-participant observation involves observing individuals or groups from the outside, often without any direct interaction. The work of Erving Goffman (1971) is the best example of such an approach. Goffman observed people in their natural settings, including theaters, cafeterias, train stations, public restrooms and built a dramaturgical theory of human interaction. This approach saw social actors as in a continual state of performance and interpretation. Adler and Adler (1994) note that the major problem with this form of research concerns its validity, as without interacting with people, the researcher is always interpreting their behavior from his perspective, without benefit of learning the subjective perspective of the individuals involved.

Qualitative researchers sometimes study situations and organizations of which they are a part. This type of research, observer as participant is a potentially fruitful but difficult form of qualitative research. Sadovnik (1994) and Semel (1994) provide accounts of the difficulties of conducting

research in schools in which they were teaching and of the need to bracket out their insider perspective as a member of the group from their outside perspective as researcher.

One of the most controversial issues in observational research is the question of consent. Although IRB (Institutional Review Board) regulations require that researchers inform their subjects that they will be studying them, some researchers argue that deception may be necessary to uncover the workings of some organizations. Journalists, for example, sometime pose as members without consent in order to do an expose. For example, Emily Sachar taught as a New York City public school teacher for a year and then wrote a series of articles in *Newsday*, later published as *Shut Up and Let the Lady Teach* (1991). The principal, teachers, and students in the school did not know she was a journalist until the series was published. Punch (1994) argues that although deception is generally a violation of social science research codes, there may be times when the public good outweighs this restriction, so long as the ethical dictum, "do no harm" is followed.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGNS

Qualitative policy research must be conducted in a systematic manner if policy makers are going to take its recommendations seriously. Therefore, we must be able to evaluate the research designs of qualitative studies. The criteria for such evaluation include:

- Identification of comments about participant/site selection-sampling procedures, ethical clearance procedures, design of data collection protocols, and data analysis instruments;
- Rationale for sampling procedures—choice of sites, participants, and size of cohort;
- Deployment of different data collection instruments—interviews, observation, documents, and audio/video recordings;
- Systematic procedure for recording data—protocols, and transcription conventions;
- Systematic procedure for analyzing data;
- Reliability of sample size: Although qualitative research does not require the type of reliability and generalizabilty of quantitative research, the question of sample size remains an important one. Whether educational policy makers can or should make policy based on one classroom or school is an important question. The evaluation of sample size usually revolves around whether or not the case or cases can be seen in some way as representative of a larger population of which it or they are a part. (Creswell 2005, in cited in Singh, 2005)

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, 20) provide a useful discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative research:

Strengths

- The data are based on the participants' own categories of meaning.
- It is useful for studying a limited number of cases in depth.
- It is useful for describing complex phenomena.
- Provides individual case information.
- Can conduct cross-case comparisons and analysis.
- Provides understanding and description of people's personal experiences of phenomena (i.e., the "emic" or insider's viewpoint).

- Can describe, in rich detail, phenomena as they are situated and embedded in local contexts.
- The researcher identifies contextual and setting factors as they relate to the phenomenon of interest.
- The researcher can study dynamic processes (i.e., documenting sequential patterns and change).
- The researcher can use the primarily qualitative method of "grounded theory" to generate inductively a tentative but explanatory theory about a phenomenon.
- Can determine how participants interpret "constructs" (e.g., self-esteem, IQ).
- Data are usually collected in naturalistic settings in qualitative research.
- Qualitative approaches are responsive to local situations, conditions, and stakeholders' needs.
- Qualitative researchers are responsive to changes that occur during the conduct of a study (especially during extended fieldwork) and may shift the focus of their studies as a result.
- Qualitative data in the words and categories of participants lend themselves to exploring how and why phenomena occur.
- One can use an important case to demonstrate vividly a phenomenon to the readers of a report.
- Determine *idiographic* causation (i.e., determination of causes of a particular event).

Weaknesses

- Knowledge produced may not generalize to other people or other settings (i.e., findings may be unique to the relatively few people included in the research study).
- It is difficult to make quantitative predictions.
- It is more difficult to test hypotheses and theories.
- It may have lower credibility with some administrators and commissioners of programs.
- It generally takes more time to collect the data when compared to quantitative research.
- Data analysis is often time consuming.
- The results are more easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies.

Based upon these strengths and weaknesses, it is clear that qualitative research should be an important part of public policy research. Riehl (2004) argues that qualitative research in the sociology of education has made valuable contributions to our understanding of educational problems and has offered policy makers useful data for school improvement. In an age where educational research is dominated by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education labeling experimental research design and randomized field trials modeled after the pharmaceutical and medical research communities as the "gold standard" for evaluating what works and recommending policy and programmatic interventions, it is imperative that qualitative research is recognized as an important tool for policy makers. Whether studies are totally qualitative or part of a mixed-method approach that uses both quantitative and qualitative methods, qualitative research provides important data for public policy. Chatterji (2005) argues convincingly that a mixed-method approach rich in qualitative methods must be part of extended-term mixed-method (ETMM) evaluation designs to ensure researchers provide policy makers with the best evidence of what works in education. This is certainly true in other areas such as public administration, health care, transportation, criminal justice, and other public policy realms.

A number of examples of how qualitative research informs public policy are in order. Annette Lareau's *Home Advantage* (1989) and *Unequal Childhood: Class, Race and Family Life* (2004) provide in-depth ethnographic accounts of the relationship between family and schools. These books

provide policy makers with an understanding of how families and schools can work together to improve student achievement. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's *Domestica* provides a qualitative investigation of the world on Latina immigrant domestic workers in Los Angeles and offers important findings to improve the working and living conditions of immigrants. Lois Weis's *Class Reunion* examines how a group of working class adults in a northeastern de-industrialized city have adapted to the new service economy. A follow-up to her *Working Class without Work* (1990), Weis re-interviewed the graduates of the high school she studied in 1985. Using what she terms qualitative longitudinality (2005), Weis provides two ethnographic snapshots of the same individuals over two decades and how they responded to changing economic and social conditions. Weis's work provides important data for policy makers concerned with improving the lives of workers in a rapidly changing global economy. Roger Sanjek, *The Future of Us All* is a detailed qualitative ethnography of the Elmhurst-Corona section of Queens in New York City. Based on fifteen years of ethnographic research, Sanjek chronicles how the new waves of immigrant groups turned the area into one of the most racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the United States. Through an analysis of how these immigrant groups interacted with neighbors who had been their longer and with the New York City political and economic elites, Sanjek provides valuable data for urban planners and policy makers. These are just a few of the important qualitative studies that have made significant contributions to public policy debates. They are all methodologically rigorous, scrupulously researched, and illustrate the importance of qualitative research for public policy research.

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29 Interpretation and Intention in Policy Analysis

Hendrik Wagenaar

1 INTERPRETATION IN POLICY ANALYSIS: CAUSAL VERSUS INTENTIONAL EXPLANATION

The interpretative approach to policy analysis is not one singular method, but rather a family of approaches. Different approaches to interpretive theory have varying takes on the object of interpretation (intentions, reasons, traditions, stories, discourses, systems of signs), follow different methods, and operate on different philosophical preconceptions, but their shared assumption is that policy formation and implementation, or broader, the activities and interactions of government agencies, public officials and their publics in civil society, cannot be properly understood unless we grasp their relevant meanings (Bevir and Rhodes 2003). For example, as Yanow puts it in characterizing interpretive policy analysis: "An interpretive approach to policy analysis (...) is one that focuses on the meanings of policy, on the values, feelings, or beliefs they express, and on the processes by which those meanings are communicated to and 'read' by various audiences." (Yanow 2000) This is the standard definition of interpretive policy analysis, and obviously it makes sense as it couples a particular mode of inquiry and explanation to a particular image of the social-political world. That world, which is both the object and context of policy analysis, is characterized by "values, feelings and beliefs" (Weiss and Rein 1970) and the way these are expressed and communicated among various groups. It is also—something that is undercharacterized in Yanow's definition—about acting in a world of uncertainty that originates in complexity (Bohman 1996; Dryzek 1990), irrepressible ambiguity and contingency (Schwandt 1997), and the inevitable conflict and incompatibility that spring forth from pluralistic practices and institutional positions (Kekes 1993; Wagenaar 2002).

To understand such a world, explanations in terms of causal connections between an entity *x* and an entity *y* don't make much sense. For example, to say that, when one declines to vote for candidate A because one disagrees with his position on abortion, that his or her nonvoting behavior is "caused" by a position on abortion would be seriously misleading. After all, despite his or her stand on abortion, one could still have decided to vote for him because one believes he is a better leader in times of crisis, or because he is the lesser of two evils, or because one feels affinity with his personality, or because one has always been voting Republican/Democrat and to do otherwise now just doesn't feel right, or because one's father-in-law votes for him, and so forth. Not only does the terminology of causation suggest an airtight level of determination that simply isn't warranted in the world of human action, but more importantly, it is beside the point. The very concepts that figure in the explanation—voting, position, abortion, strong leader—are not mere behaviors but *action* concepts, that is activities that are defined and constituted by an intrinsic *intention* (Fay 1975; Taylor 1977). Differently put, we, as voters and citizens of Western liberal states, grasp these concepts, and the associated behaviors, in terms of what they *mean* to us.

Meanings are not causally connected, but intentionally. An action is explained intentionally when we are able to specify the future state of affairs that required the specific action. (Elster 1983; von Wright 1971).[1] The difference with causal explanation is in the different *explananda*. An example

suggested by von Wright will make this clear. When an experimental psychologist stimulates the cortex of a monkey to elicit certain movements of the monkey's left arm, the language of intentions plays no role in the explanatory scheme. We could perhaps be tempted to say that the electrical stimulation made the monkey wave his hand, but that would be irrelevant to the causal explanation of the arm movement as an effect of the stimulation. By saying that the electrical current to the cortex, triggered certain neurological activities in certain nerve strata, which in turn made the muscles of the left arm contract so that the monkey lifted his arm, is to exhaustively explain the monkey's arm movement. To add that the stimulation of the cortex made the monkey wave at us would be to ascribe something to the monkey that greatly and unwarrantedly, transcends the explanatory scheme. What is explained is how parts of the monkeys body move under the causal influence of electrical stimulation of the cortex.

Now consider the following situation. At the time of this writing, a small controversy erupted in the Dutch media over a Moroccan Imam who, upon being presented to the Minister of Immigration in a meeting—who, a fact that is essential to this small drama, is a woman—refused to shake hands with her. The scene, including the minister's defiant reaction, was broadcast on television, and instantly a wave of indignation at the Imam's rude behavior engulfed the media. Now, to explain the Imam's behavior in causal terms would be wholly incommensurate to the situation at hand. In fact, in the days following the incident, various actors in the media, including the Imam himself, stepped in to explain the refusal to shake hands. The Imam referred to the words of the Prophet that prohibit men and women from shaking hands because of the close association of touching and sexual intercourse. The refusal to shake hands was, in fact, meant as a sign of respect to the female minister. Other Muslims, however, saw this as a particularly strict interpretation of the Koran that was inappropriate for Muslims in a modern, urban society. Others thought the minister's behavior rude and lacking in respect and pointed out that in many religious communities relations between men and women are strictly regulated. Among orthodox Jews, for example, men and women are also not allowed to shake hands.

To summarize the situation around the Minister and the Imam, the *explanandum* in this case, is not a particular muscular movement, but an *action*, a particular behavior that is constituted by an intention. Or, as von Wright puts it, an *inner* aspect that is behind the action, and the results that the action is supposed to bring about or the *outer* aspect of the action (von Wright 1971, 86). In human affairs the inner and the outer aspect of action always go together, for most of the time we act because we intend to bring about some result. In fact, by taking the intention (not to violate the commands of the Koran) out of the explanatory scheme of the Imam refusing to shake hands with the minister, we wouldn't be able to make sense of the situation. The physical movements alone are not even a necessary condition of the action "avoid shaking hands," because there are other ways of doing that like walking out of the room, turning one's back, or ignoring the minister altogether. In this particular case, intentions literally *constitute* the situation, from the expectation of shaking hands in situations like this to refusing to acknowledge the minister's extended hand. The whole storm erupted because a social code exists that defines extending and accepting (or refusing) hands as the patterned activity we recognize as greeting (Geertz 1973).

2 HOW NOT TO THINK ABOUT INTENTION

This is what we mean when we speak of actions having *meaning*. This is also the bare-bone formulation of how we explain meaningful action; how we acquire valid knowledge of it, through intentional explanation. But having said this, it leaves many questions open, some of which will be discussed in this section. First, the immediate conclusion after stating the necessity of intention in understanding human situations is that to be appropriate to their subject, the social sciences require a different kind of inquiry than the natural sciences, namely interpretive inquiry. In general terms

this seems to be the proper conclusion, but in the actual practice of doing interpretive inquiry, there are so many complexities and confusions that this becomes an almost meaningless, and in some cases even misleading, statement. But let's first state the case of an interpretive approach to the social sciences, and for the purpose of this chapter, policy sciences.

The central fact that necessitates interpretive explanation in the social sciences is that the unit of analysis, the "brute" data of the social and policy sciences, are not hardwired into social reality, but require interpretation to make them "visible" at all. Terms such as "voting," "marrying," or "negotiating" can only be inferred from the physical movements that carry them by assuming a particular purpose or intention that makes this particular movement or verbal utterance a recognizable case of marrying or negotiating. In the social sciences observation requires interpretation.

Some analysts infer from this that interpretive inquiry is, by inference, a subjective enterprise. There are two reasons why the evocation of the term subjective without any further qualification is misleading. First, the acceptability of interpretive statements is as constrained by the empirical world as is the acceptability of causal statements (Thomas 1979), but, it should be added, constrained in a different way. Second, the term "subjective" suggests that interpretation is something that takes place within the mind, or is about objects that can only be grasped by mental processes. Both objections to the term "subjective" hang together.

Let's clarify the misunderstandings about the alleged subjective character of the word "intention" by looking at an example. What does it mean when in a police report, it is stated: "The suspect was arrested because he intended to rape the victim." This statement does certainly not refer to some mental state that preceded the act of rape, that is only accessible by the person himself and that only he can avow or deny. Intention has "no experiential essence," as Jeffrey Coulter puts it. The word "intend" in the above phrase does not denote some subjective state of the suspect's mind that can only be reflected upon by the subject himself, or inferred, through empathic identification of an observer with a subject. The seemingly mentalistic word "intend" here refers as much to an observable action as the seemingly objective word "rape" later in the sentence. As Coulter states:

> To learn the expression "I intend" is not to learn, miraculously, to assign a label to some introspected experience—for how could one be trained to make the correct identification of his introspected percept?—but consists, rather in learning how to perform what Austin termed a "commisive."[2] To declare one's [or disavow, as in this example—HW] intention is to perform a specific sort of illocutionary act, which, like all such acts, require appropriate "felicity" conditions. Thus there is a clear and crucial connection between particular sorts of intentions and particular sorts of circumstances.... Thus: A description of an intention is a description of an action (an envisaged action), not of an experience. Avowals and ascriptions of intentions, then, are organized by, and gain their intelligibility from, not some mental divinations but from the particulars of public states of affairs. (Coulter 1979)

This whole process of grasping intentions takes place in, what one could call, a semiotic public space; or, more precisely, is made possible at all by being suspended in this shared linguistic realm. If a detective weighs the evidence that will or will not lead to the conclusion that the suspect had the intention to rape the victim, this whole process hinges on the public availability, and the possibility for public inspection of, such categories as "victim," "rape," and "consent." All actors in this drama—victim, suspect, detective, and later, district attorney, lawyer, judge—are bound by these pre-given cultural categories, and are unable to overstep the boundaries of these concepts-in-use (to use a famous phrase by Donald Schön) on peril of being misunderstood in the best case and ostracized in the worst. A different way to put this is that "data," judgments and conclusions (and the warrants for the conclusions), in this social event are all situated. They make sense only within a particular context. The rape claim is predicated on a complex set of (mostly tacit) background

knowledge about value systems surrounding gender, about the relation between men and women, about the set of conventions that guide the initiation of sexual contact, and so forth. Data, conclusions, as well as the grounds for those conclusions are constituted by the shared expectations, beliefs, values, routines, and practices of the members of a culture; "constitutive" indicating that the shared background knowledge "creates the very possibility of certain activities," and, I would add, certain categories (Searle 1995, see also Fay 1975, 76; Taylor 1977). This is the meaning of those oft-used words "public" and "transparent" here. Terms such as "rape," "sexual," "intending," (or "voting," "promising," "shaking hands") are publicly available for everyone to see. They are transparent in that:

> The public criteria for … "intending" are circumstantially bound and not restricted to some codified set of associated behaviors or experiences, as if these could be listed as a fixed set of "conditions"; members of a culture must exercise situated judgments, must analyze contexts for what could account as criteria for proper ascription or for the ratification of an avowal in those specific cases. (Coulter 1979, 44)

One way to try to end these convolutions about subjective and objective meaning is to follow Geertz and simply say that the whole dichotomy is misconceived. If we insert "meaning" where he uses "culture," we would conclude then that meaning "though ideational, (…) does not exist in someone's head, though unphysical, (…) is not an occult entity" (1973, 10). Geertz is perfectly right here, of course. It doesn't make sense to try to locate meaning, ontologically, in the mind or in some reified cultural or institutional pattern. Actions are meaningful in that they signify something, and the question is then: What does this particular action (a disavowal of rape; the refusal to shake hands) signify? Something larger then than the particularity of that singular action is being said, and this expressive force hinges on these actions being embedded in something larger in the first place, something that exists before, and independently of, the individual acting. But that something is not some reified "deep structure" or some axiomatic set of rules, but more a shared set of understandings that are linguistically inscribed in the world, and that are invoked, and, in an ongoing dialectical movement sustained, whenever we "read" the symbolic meaning of a particular behavior. So perhaps this is the place to insert what is perhaps Geertz's most often quoted statement on culture, the analysis of meaning, and the continuity between observation and explanation in interpretive analysis: "Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another" (1983, 69).

Finally, this digression on the meaning of meaning in interpretive analysis can be concluded with a more practical hands-on statement of methodological import. The dual nature of meaning implies that, whatever our research interest—for example, the intentions of mental patients navigating the revamped social service landscape of a large American city in the 1980s (Lewis et al. 1991; Wagenaar 1987), or the emergence of the school as we know it from the vagaries of institution building in the Prussian state (Hunter 1996), or the evaluation of a particular educational reform (Dunne 1993)—our work begins with the careful and precise registering of the concrete behaviors of concrete actors. Now, these behaviors can have many different guises and many different substrates. They can be statements in interviews, observed activities, written statements in documents, both formal (reports, laws, position papers) and informal (letters, diaries). They can take the form of stories that people tell to explain their actions in particular circumstances. They can be our renderings (in research notes) of what we believe we have observed. They can be descriptions (part descriptive, part interpretive) of artifacts such as buildings, cartoons, or office spaces, or of performances or rituals. Or they can be a carefully put together reconstruction of some developmental trajectory. But what ties all these different forms of registering behaviors together is that we regard them as the expressions of, the carriers of, social meaning. Behaviors are a window upon meaning; and, safe

for the a priori imposition of theoretical schemes upon the research material (a practice that Glaser and Strauss call, "pseudo-verification"), there exists no shortcut to the extrapolation of meaning from concrete, microscopic behavior. As Geertz puts it, "Behaviors must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behavior—or more precisely social action—that cultural forms find articulation" (2003, 17). The interpretive analyst acts on the assumption that the general is folded into the particular. The analogy is with chromosomes here. As chromosomes carry the full complexity of particular life form in their genetic code, so the cultural life form in all its meaningful complexity is carried within the minutiae of observed behavior.

3 VARIETIES OF INTERPRETATION IN POLICY ANALYSIS

Although the various approaches to interpretation all focus on the meanings that shape actions, they differ in important ways in how they understand and explain meaning, how they view the position of the subject in analysis, in their philosophical assumptions, and in how they articulate the role of the policy analyst. This sections describes and gives examples of two well-known approaches to interpretation in policy analysis. In the course of doing this, the discussion will also explore some further complications with interpretive analysis. I will discuss respectively Dvora Yanow´s hermeneutical approach to interpretive analysis, and Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes' interpretivist third way between hermeneutics and poststructuralism. This doesn't exhaust the family of interpretive approaches. It is often overlooked, for example, that qualitative research is, in method, analytical thrust, and explanatory logic, an interpretive approach. Some of the best known examples (Estroff 1981; Liebow 1967; Wiseman 1979) succeed in imaginatively reconstructing the experiential world of the subjects of study. In strictly numerical terms, qualitative research is the method of choice for most policy researchers (at least in Europe). Narrative analysis, discourse analysis (including poststructuralist analysis), the analysis of social practices, and deliberative policy analysis are also significant, vibrant ways of engaging in interpretive policy analysis that have resulted in important work. These are discussed in other sections of the book.

3.1 Dvora Yanow: How Does A Policy Mean?

It is probably not an overstatement to claim that Dvora Yanow´s *How Does A Policy Mean?* (Yanow 1996) was one of the books that put the interpretive approach on the agenda in post-empiricist policy analysis. For many people, her approach to interpretation has become synonymous with interpretive policy analysis proper. The book's argument is cleverly organized around a puzzle: according to any instrumental criterion, such as efficacy or efficiency in reaching the policy's goal, the Israeli policy of creating community centers in new settlements in the 1970s was deemed a failure. Nevertheless, the policy remained well-funded for a period of over twenty years, and drew continuing support from a range of political actors in Israel. How could this be? Yanow's answer to this seeming anomaly is that in the context of Israeli society and Israeli politics, the policy had a particular *meaning* for key audiences. Yanow urges the policy analyst to become sensitive to the expressive, symbolic aspect of policy. Not as an add-on to the "real"—read instrumental, material, power-related—aspects of policy making, but as an intrinsic aspect of each and every act of policy making. These meanings reside in all aspects of a policy; not just the legislative texts that state the policy's intent, but also in the actions of key groups to implement the policy and in the artifacts, such as agency buildings, their furnishings, and, one could add these days, their Web sites (Yanow 1996).

In a small and useful successor to the first book, Yanow explains how to conduct interpretive policy analysis. Conceptually, interpretive policy analysis, according to her, consists of the following elements: (1) identify the artifacts (language, objects, acts) that are the carriers of meaning; (2)

identify the interpretive communities, relevant to a policy, that are the perceivers of this meaning; (3) identify the discourses through which these meanings are communicated; (4) identify any point of conflict that suggests that different groups attach divergent meanings to some aspect of a policy (Yanow 2000).

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has famously claimed that social behavior can be seen as a text. Yanow uses this metaphor to further clarify her position in conducting interpretive policy analysis. Public policies, both in their formulation and their enactment, should be seen as texts that are "read" by various stakeholder groups and, of course, by the analyst. Apart from a limited metaphorical value, it is not always completely clear what the added value of the text metaphor is in Yanow's approach. (And in one, important way, it introduces a questionable element of meaning realism in the analysis. I will return to this later.) Yanow's methodological approach, in its careful reconstruction of the perspective of the groups that are involved and the wider context from which the policy derives its meaning, is in fact quite close to the steps in traditional qualitative analysis. For example, in one key step in her approach to interpretive policy analysis, "identifying interpretive communities," Yanow suggests to the reader that relevant information may be found in written sources (newspapers, magazines, agency newsletters, annual reports, government documents, etc.), oral sources (interviews with key actors), observation (of actions, interactions, and the material context in which these actors move about), and participation. In accessing these sources and gathering research materials, the analyst is urged to begin the process of analysis, for: "The interpretive policy analyst needs to build a context in which to access local knowledge. Knowing what specific object or piece of language has significance comes from situational familiarity—understanding what is important to stakeholders, to policy-relevant publics" (2000, 38). The actual process of analysis entails two steps: "(1) a daily sense making, out of which (2) puzzles emerge (events or acts or interactions that contradict what the analyst expected, or which he cannot make sense of, given what he knows at that moment, or which contradict one another)" (ibid.). In short, these are the very same data sources and analytical steps that make up any good qualitative study. Finally, in addition to identifying interpretive communities and how they understand a particular policy, Yanow suggests some interesting other foci of analysis that open up windows on public policy. These are the analysis of metaphors, of policy categories (the contradictions and ambiguities that reveal the hidden assumptions behind the way a particular policy carves up the world), the analysis of policy artifacts (particularly buildings), policy programs (by which Yanow, going by her text, seems to mean policy instruments), and of policy rituals.

Yanow's version of interpretive policy analysis, as expounded in her two books and various articles, pairs clarity of exposition to practicality in its presentation of how to go about doing it. Yet it also suffers from two problems: (1) a tendency to reify meaning, and a concomitant instrumental notion of the stance of the interpretive analyst' and (2) the absence of conflict and power in her analytic scheme.

Yanow's version of interpretive policy analysis suffers from what is sometimes called "meaning realism." Meaning realism is the view that "meanings are fixed entities that can be discovered and that exist independent of the interpreter" (Schwandt 2000). Meaning realism is a feature of those versions of hermeneutic analysis that aim at exegesis, the elucidation of the meaning of texts. The method of exegesis revolves around two related premises: (1) the interpreter and the object of interpretation are distinct, and (2) the first is not involved with the latter. The second premise must be taken in an epistemological way. The analyst is not necessarily emotionally uninvolved, but he is, or more precisely, he must always remain external to and unaffected by the act of interpretation (Schwandt 2000). To get the interpretive analysis started, the analyst not only has to project an a priori, and in practice more or less distinct and monolithic, "meaning" in the world, the exact nature of which is to be discerned by the analyst, but simultaneously, the analyst has to place himself outside the process of meaning-making (despite protestations that the analyst is part of the world that he analyzes) to function as an Archimedean point. The analyst gains knowledge about an object

(the meaning of human action), and the (implicit) implication is that there is one right meaning to be discovered out there. Meaning is objectified

It is at this point in particular that Yanow's text-analogy is significant. She introduces the claim that policies can be seen as texts not to elucidate a decentered, relational system of meaning-formation (such as is common in poststructuralist and deliberative approaches to interpretation. See the respective chapters in this book.), but to set out her exegetic approach to interpretation. The meaning of the policy as a "text analogue" is then "read" by the various constituencies *and* the analyst. In fact, it is the task of the analyst to "clarify" meanings, while remaining aloof from the interactions between actors by which meaning is established (Yanow 2000, 17–18). This puts Yanow squarely in the hermeneutical-essentialist tradition of finding the true meaning of texts, as some relation of correspondence between some fixed meaning "out there" and its representation by the analyst. Differently put, her aim is not to explore the internal relations (consonances and differences) between the elements of her policy system, and so to infer meaning, more or less a la Geertz, but to read the meaning that is somehow residing in the policy (Yanow 2000, 19). And although Yanow's "reading" is methodologically sophisticated, this doesn't detract from the point that meaning is pulled from the slice of social reality as a rabbit out of a hat. To quote Schwandt once again: "Thus, in interpretive traditions, the interpreter objectifies (i.e., stands over and against) that which is to be interpreted. And, in that sense, the interpreter remains unaffected by and external to the interpretive process" (2000, 195). This is a problem that affects most hermeneuticaly oriented approaches to interpretive policy analysis.

Second, and related to the preceding point, in Yanow's version of interpretive analysis there is little room for ambiguity, indeterminacy, power, and conflict. In general, for policy analysis to be appropriate to its intended use, it must be consonant with its political setting. This is not a "secondary consideration," as Dryzek rightly points out, for policy analysis differs from pure social science in that it is intended to be used in practical political settings. Thus, "social science may fail as policy analysis as it fails to address its political setting" (Dryzek 1982, 310). And as countless analysts have pointed out, that setting is characterized by interaction, power play, structural inequality, deep complexity, indeterminacy, dispersed decision making, lack of trust among actors, value pluralism, and a fundamental orientation to practice (Bohman 1996; Dryzek 1982, 1990; Forester 1999; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003b; Stone 1997; Wagenaar and Cook 2003). Very little of this resonates in Yanow's version of interpretive analysis. At best, she is willing to "map" the various meanings that populate the particular policy landscape that is the object of analysis. For a more direct rendering of the typical characteristics of the setting of policy analysis, we need to turn to such approaches as frame analysis, poststructuralism, and deliberative policy analysis.

3.2 MARK BEVIR AND ROD RHODES: INTERPRETING BRITISH GOVERNANCE

Bevir and Rhodes' approach to interpretive political analysis distinguishes itself from Yanow's approach in that it attempts to supply to interpretation a deeper philosophical context. Toward this end, it centers on three concepts: *tradition*, *dilemma,* and *decenteredness*. In their main text *Interpreting British Governance* (Bevir and Rhodes 2003), the authors argue the case for interpretation in political science by stating two key assumptions: (1) people act on their beliefs and preferences, and (2) we cannot infer people's beliefs from objective facts about them (such as income level) or general assumptions (such as the rationality of human actors) (2003, 19). Taken together these two premises lead to the conclusion that we cannot get around interpretation in political science. Bevir and Rhodes' version of interpretive analysis is sophisticated in that it shows awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of a large chunk of the family of interpretive approaches. In fact, it explicitly announces itself as providing a "third way" between hermeneutics and poststructuralism that, although indebted to both traditions, attempts to avoid some of the problems that the authors

ascribe to both of them.[3] In particular, Bevir and Rhodes are sympathetic to the decentered approach of poststructuralists such as Foucault, who see meaning as emerging from an almost randomly thrown together assemblage of practices, beliefs, and meanings that make the very existence of certain social categories possible. To understand a social object or a particular behavior is to interpret it in the wider discourse that makes that object of behavior possible (2003, 23). On the other hand, they reject the poststructuralists´ hostility toward the role of human agency in social affairs, which makes these approaches "come dangerously close to denying any scope to the subject and reason" (2003, 43). Hermeneutic interpretivism departs from an epistemologically dubious subjectivity and essentialism (the all-knowledgeable, autonomous subjects who "think and act according solely to their own reasons and commands" (2003, 32), so that this approach can "come dangerously close to embodying an analysis of the subject as autonomous and an analysis of reason as pure and universal" (ibid.).

Bevir and Rhodes introduce the concept of "tradition" to balance agency and determinism in understanding intention and meaning in the world of politics. As they state:

> (A) rejection of autonomy need not entail a rejection of agency. To deny that subjects can escape from all social influences is not to deny that they can act creatively for reasons that make sense to them. On the contrary, we must allow for agency if only because we cannot separate and distinguish beliefs and actions by reference to their social context alone. Different people adopt different beliefs and perform different actions against the background of the same social structure. Thus, there must be a space on social contexts where individual subjects decide what beliefs to hold and what actions to perform for their own reasons. . .This view of agency suggests that we see social context not as episteme, languages or discourses, but as traditions. The concepts of episteme, language and discourse typically invoke social structures that fix individual acts and exist independently of them. In contrast the notion of tradition implies that the relevant social context is one in which subjects are born, which then acts as the background to their beliefs and actions without fixing them. Traditions allow for the possibility of subjects adapting, developing and even rejecting much of their heritage. (2003, 32)

Bevir and Rhodes take pains not to reify tradition. Traditions are not immovable superstructures with an inexorable inner logic that determine people's beliefs and actions. Traditions are not cultural prisons. Rather, traditions are an "initial influence" on people that "colors their later actions." Whenever the situation calls for it, people may feel the need to alter traditions. Traditions are "contingent products of the way in which people develop specific beliefs, preferences and actions" (2003, 34). Traditions emerge from "local reasoning" and "micro-practices" (2003, 35). It is here that that Bevir and Rhodes stake out the middle position between hermeneutics and poststructuralism. On the one hand: "We have to redefine tradition in a nonessentialist, decentered manner to aid any lingering sense of objective reason." On the other hand: "While a rejection of the autonomous subject prevents a belief in a neutral or universal reason, the fact of agency enables us to accept local reasoning in a way that Foucault often seems reluctant to do" (2003, 35).

How do traditions change? They change because actors struggle with dilemmas. Sticking to their nonessentialist program, the authors emphasize that dilemmas are not hardwired into reality. Dilemmas may arise from people's experiences, but this need not be the case. "Dilemmas can arise from both theoretical and moral reflection and from experiences of worldly pressures" (2003, 36). The point is that traditions and dilemmas are both defined in a *decentered* way. Traditions, dilemmas, and local practices are mutually constitutive: "Because people confront these dilemmas in diverse traditions, there arises a political contest over what constitutes the nature of the failings and what should be done about them" (2003, 64). Bevir and Rhodes' version of interpretivism thus hinges on a decentered approach to the study of political phenomena. Basic categories such as policy institu-

tions, problems, programs, networks, or governance, are not pre-given, but should be explained as the contingent products of actors' ongoing actions, struggles, and negotiations. They summarize their decentered version of interpretivism by commenting on the concept of policy networks: "We build change into the heart of our account of networks by exploring how individual actors respond to dilemmas to reinterpret and reconstruct practices and the traditions they embody" (2003, 71). Methodologically, Bevir and Rhodes propagate the microsociological approach that Geertz argued for. Decentered studies of political phenomena require that we "build a multifaceted picture of how the several actors understand and construct" the phenomenon. We should not expect to find one overarching truth, but rather, as Yanow also noted, a fundamentally pluralistic world; a world made up of "narratives about how (. . .) people understand what they are doing in networks, where these understandings usually both overlap and conflict with one another" (2003, 66).

In its nonfoundational understanding of meaning, and in its emphasis on the micro-analysis of the beliefs and actions of all actors who are involved with a particular policy sector, this approach attempts to steer free from the meaning realism of more exegetically minded forms of hermeneutic analysis. And with its singular focus on actors' struggles with and over policy dilemmas and un-intended consequences, it is consonant with the complex, contested world of public policy. Yet, it suffers from the problem that it is not always clear what the epistemic status of traditions is. On the one hand, traditions are observer-independent entities, or phenomena, out there in the world that form the object of study. ("Traditions are contingent products of the ways in which people develop specific beliefs, preferences and actions" (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 34)). On the other, they are described as analytical categories that serve as an explanatory tool that is specifically tailored to the goals of the analyst. ("Political scientists construct traditions in ways appropriate to explaining the particular sets of beliefs and actions in which they are interested" (2003, 33)). In their examples, the authors vacillate between both. Their analysis of Thatcherism, for example, is mostly a categorization of the different understandings of the academic literature on the Thatcher reforms organized according to the four well-known, but preconceived political traditions in Britain (liberal, Tory, Whig, and social-ist). The four "narratives" are not based on any empirical inquiry into the way the Thatcher reforms were experienced by local administrators, professionals at public service agencies, or residents in public housing projects. Their analysis of the reforms by New Labor, however, trace the tortuous emergence of joined-up government as the result of labor officials struggling with a series of political dilemmas, policy problems, and the unintended consequences of Thatcherite reforms.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS: POLICY INTERPRETATION, GOVERNANCE, AND DEMOCRACY

To what extent has interpretive policy analysis succeeded in becoming a viable alternative to insti-tutionalized empiricist policy analysis? The answer must be guarded and qualified. As a theoretical endeavor, as manifested by the number and sophistication of the articles, books, and conferences that are devoted to one or another form of interpretive policy analysis, it is by now a blossoming branch of the academic discipline of policy studies. Most scholars working in this tradition no lon-ger have much trouble in getting their work published, even in the mainstream policy and public administration journals. Certain books, such as Fischer and Forester's *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* (1993), or Deborah Stone's *Policy Paradox* (1997), have found their way into undergraduate policy curricula. And both the American Political Science Association and its European counterpart, the European Consortium of Political Research regularly devote space in their conferences to interpretive approaches to the policy sciences.

In the professional field the picture is less clear. If we restrict the interpretive approach to qualitative research, then the interpretive turn is resounding success, certainly in Europe. Much applied policy research is qualitative, generally following the format of a short case study, followed

by some conclusions and recommendations. However, it must be feared that a lot of this work is what Glaser and Strauss despairingly call "opportunistic," with "tacked-on conclusions" (and ditto recommendations, one should add), and with little guarantee of the quality of the interviewing and data-analysis. Solid studies that, for example, shed light on the implementation of a policy initiative by inquiring into interpretive communities and the language and artifacts of a policy program (Yanow 2000), or that map stubborn policy controversies (Rein 1983) are much harder to find within government agencies and for-profit think tanks. In this sense, it must be feared that the lack of relevance that has been ascribed to empiricist policy analysis (Fischer 2003; Rein 1976) has not been alleviated by a shift to quick-and-dirty qualitative research. In practical professional terms, in these instances the interpretive turn amounts to not much more than "interpretation-lite."

Yet, this is not all that there is to it. Interpretive policy analysis, rooted in a different understanding of what amounts to valid and justified knowledge of the social world, has always held out a different conception of democracy; a different understanding of the role of experts and citizens in the organization of democratic policy making. Interpretive social science, with its focus of making the meaning of actions transparent—both one's own and those of others—is seen to increase the possibility of increased communication between different groups in society (Fay 1975, 80; Geertz 1973, 24). With hindsight, this promise of enlightenment and the subsequent increase of communication in a pluralistic society was overly optimistic. In a complex, conflicting world with deep, structural inequalities of power and access to essential resources, there is little chance that constructive communication spontaneously increases when competing groups are informed about the meaning that a particular government action has for different groups (Bohman 1996). For that to happen, more conditions have to be fulfilled, and it is precisely along these lines that interpretive approaches have made their greatest inroads in the last two decades.

Looking back, what has become clear is that policy analysis has not changed policy making, but instead that changes in policy making have created the possibilities, and in many cases the *necessity*, for allowing interpretive inquiry into policy analysis. Spurred by the emergence of what has become known as the network society, policy is increasingly made in complex, more or less autonomous networks of governmental and societal actors, often blurring the boundaries between the traditional levels of government (Pierre 2000; Rhodes 1996). Participants in these networks, realizing their mutual dependency in getting things done, have to find ways to collaborate—even in the face of conflicting interests and values. In addition, due to the technical and social complexity of various policy fields, government actors increasingly run into the limits of hierarchical-instrumental policy styles (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003a). The usual strategies to deal with policy complexity—such as disaggregating a complex problem in its constituent parts to solve the problem piecemeal, step by step, or to design a systems model of the problem—are extensions of instrumental rationality. In actual practice they fall short of solving the problem because they are unable to capture the dynamic interaction between the parts that is the hallmark of complexity (Urry 2003). For this reason Dryzek suggests that only nonreductionist strategies, in particular the collaboration of a wide range of participants in a communicatively rational way, will be able to deal with policy complexity (Dryzek 1990).

In many advanced liberal democracies, this situation has led to efforts to involve those affected by policy initiatives in governing through interactive policy making or coproduction. Although initially these experiments in governance were often dominated by administrators, and amounted to little more than elaborate consultation models, increasingly nongovernment actors are given genuine decision power, leading to collaborative policy making (Innes and Booher 2003), empowered participatory governance (Fung and Wright 2003), and deliberative planning (Forester 1999; Healy 1997) In this changing and fragmented policy landscape where policy is often made outside official hierarchical channels, and with actors who were, until recently, removed from any decision-making power, the consonance between an interpretive epistemology, communicative rationality, and a participative, deliberative mode of democracy, has the chance to achieve greater institutional

expression. In this way, policy analysis seems to return to Lasswell's ideal of a policy science of democracy. In the "contextual orientation" that is the heart of Lasswell's vision, policy analysis was always to include the knowledge and judgments of citizens in the solution of collective problems. Articulating and grasping meaning is a central part of this endeavor, because meaning making, as Hajer and Wagenaar conclude (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003a), although ambiguous and open-ended, is remarkably well adapted to the inconsistencies and contradictions that are characteristic of the pluralistic, complex, and indeterminate everyday policy world; where rationality is no longer seen as the efficient achievement of predetermined goals, but rather as the difficult task of trying to imagine the other's perspective through a process of open, reciprocal, and respectful communication.

NOTES

1. In the philosophy of science literature a distinction is often made between "explanation" and "understanding." The term "explanation" is used for causal explanation in the natural sciences, and "understanding" for a different kind of explanation in the humanities or "Geistewissenschaften." The difference is sometimes said to reside in the fact that understanding has a certain psychological ring to it. Methodologically, this implies that understanding requires empathy, or the "re-creation in the mind of the scholar of the mental atmosphere, the thoughts and feelings and motivations, of the objects of his study" (von Wright 1971, 6). Hermeneutic philosophy, the branch of philosophy that takes the interpretation of the meaning of language as its entrance into grasping the world of human affairs, also rests on the same distinction between (causal) explanation and (interpretive) understanding. However, it considers the latter not as a psychological but as a language-oriented, semantic category. The empathic and the language-based version of understanding have in common that they see it as a distinct, *sui generis*, form of obtaining knowledge about the world that derives its special character from the nature of its object, namely human action. In this chapter I tend to steer clear from the debates and controversies that surround the alleged distinction between explanation and understanding. Instead I use the word "explanation" to refer both to causal and intentional explanation (Elster 1983; von Wright, 1971).
2. "The whole point of a commissive is to commit the speaker to a certain course of action. Examples are: promise, covenant, contract, undertake, bind myself, give my word, am determined to, intend, declare my intention, mean to.... (etc.)" (J. L. Austin, in Coulter, 1979, 163).
3. Poststructuralism in policy analysis encompasses a variety of approaches such as narrative analysis, Foucauldian genealogical analysis, governmentality, and discourse analysis, with different methodological emphases and varying substantive interest. They have in common that they consider meaning not as residing in the external world (in which meanings could be "read" by an observer, and in which language would be an expression of this external meaning), but as immanent to language systems. Meaning is in the *relation* between elements. (Howarth,2000) Where poststructuralism differs from structuralism is that it situates the interplay of symbols in a wider context of language and action that informs the meanings thus derived. The assumption is that semantic meaning—and in its wake, institutional and personal identity—derives from the interplay of the elements of the symbolic system in relation to the wider world—itself a structure of symbols. Differently put, poststructural approaches share the insight that language is *constitutive* of social reality.

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