

# Interpretivist Methods in an International Relations Classroom: Teaching and Learning Tools

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**ABSTRACT:** In the recent years, the discipline of International Relations has been freeing itself from scientism that haunted its early evolution and is gradually embracing new methods and techniques that had previously been developed in history, anthropology, sociology and other related disciplines. As a consequence, a growing number International Relations MA students have been choosing to write and defend interpretivist thesis projects. Many of them have also been choosing to employ such qualitative methods as discourse analysis, narrative analysis, ethnography, genealogy and archival research. This posed a few pedagogic challenges. Traditionally dominated by positivist approach and methodology, the discipline of International Relations has been mostly accustomed to evaluative systems centred on assessing the correctness of reproduction of exemplary practices. Yet, interpretivist learning should be centred on contextual understanding, not mathematical precision or universal correctness. Instead of trying to achieve objectivity, replicability and falsifiability, an interpretivist project must aim at demonstrating reflexivity and hermeneutic sensibility. In this paper, we come up with two assignment designs suitable for interpretivist methodological training in an interdisciplinary International Relations classroom and aiming at developing the abovementioned skills.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The practical problem this paper is trying to reflect upon and provisionally resolve is stemming from a concrete academic locality: Central European University's (CEU) International Relations (IR) Department. In the recent years, a considerable share of all graduating IR MA students have been choosing to write and defend interpretivist thesis projects. Many of them have also been choosing to employ such qualitative methods as discourse analysis, narrative analysis, ethnography, genealogy and archival research. Arguably, this interest in interpretivist and critical research questions has been conditioned by both the current state of the discipline pushing its boundaries towards postfoundationalist epistemology, and by the department's hybridity (i.e. absence of dominant approach to social analysis) that allowed it to embrace those changes and reflect them in its academic output.

The same conditions, however, created a series of pedagogic challenges that we, as research design and methods instructors doing interpretivist research ourselves, have been trying to tackle in classroom. Traditionally dominated by positivist approach and methodology, the discipline of IR has been mostly accustomed to evaluative systems centred on assessing the correctness of reproduction of exemplary practices. At the same time, the main learning goals that most IR methods and research design courses have been posing were focused on the development of students' ability to conduct research based on such positivist criteria for good social analysis as objectivity, replicability, and falsifiability. Yet, because of the ontological and epistemological premises behind interpretivist IR research, its procedures cannot rely on these criteria as the sole indicators of its quality. Instead, they should be centred around ensuring and explicating researchers' reflexivity and hermeneutic sensibility. Similarly, the learning process in an interpretivist methods course cannot be assessed by how closely a student approximates some decontextualized ideal – interpretivist learning, just like interpretivist research more generally, should be centred on developing contextual understanding, not aiming at mathematical precision or universal correctness.

In practice, however, it proved difficult to recalibrate the interpretivist methods course to fit those ends. First, this recalibration happened to be challenging due to the discipline's positivist bias resulting in the scarcity of evaluation methods and teaching tools suitable for developing reflexivity and contextual sensibility in an IR classroom. Another obstacle was many students' political science background, which turned the positivist criteria into the most natural language for students to talk – some of them simply tried to adapt the language of variables, hypotheses and theory testing to fit their

interpretivist projects or claimed to be doing interpretivist work, while implicitly holding positivist assumptions and slipping into positivist mode of reasoning. In this paper, we come up with two assignment designs suitable for interpretivist methodological training in an interdisciplinary IR classroom. The primary purpose of both assignments is to develop in young IR scholars hermeneutic sensibility and reflexivity through reasoning in terms of the dialectics of similarity and difference. By doing this we try to respond to a general disciplinary trend: the growing importance of interpretivist methods in the study of international politics in the global academia and in policy research. This paper is our attempt to equip the ongoing transformation with corresponding teaching and learning tools.

## **2 POSITIVIST CRITERIA OF GOOD SOCIAL ANALYSIS AND THEIR INADEQUACY FOR INTERPRETIVIST IR**

Much of IR literature on research design and methods propagates positivist approach to social analysis and positivist evaluation standards for knowledge claims (King, Keohane and Verba 1994; George and Bennet 2005; Bennet and Elman 2007; Schmitter 2008). This presumes that 'good' social research, with minor exceptions, should meet a set of requirements that are analogous to those developed in the field of natural sciences. Among those requirements one could mention objectivity, replicability and falsification. Such standards carry a distinctive load of assumptions about the social world and its potential knowability by human researchers. First, they anticipate the ultimate stability of the social system, which ensures replicability and generalizability of research findings. Second, they are founded on the assumption that a researcher should try to occupy a position external to the studied phenomena and to minimize possible bias by following a set of procedures that help achieve objectivity, which is deemed possible and desirable in social-scientific and natural-scientific settings alike.

In contrast, interpretivist scholars claim that the positivist criteria of objectivity, replicability and falsification are inapplicable to social analysis, because its subject – social reality – differs fundamentally from the natural world (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013). While positivists treat social reality as stable, external to human experience, but still knowable by human researchers, interpretivists draw an important distinction between social and physical phenomena. The occurrence of physical phenomena depends on the interaction of what one calls forces, matter and other substances existing independently of what humans think about them and, to the best of our knowledge, are incapable of strategic or conscious action. The occurrence of social phenomena depends of the interaction of social subjects. The main difference between natural substances and social subjects is that, again, to the best of our knowledge, the latter are capable of strategic and conscious action – social subjects can decide to behave in one or another manner, and they can do this because of either rational or emotional reasons. At the core of that capability, is their capacity to communicate, i.e. their ability to produce, reproduce, and interpret signs.

The same natural phenomenon can be interpreted as a different sign in different spatial and temporal contexts. For instance, smoke coming out of a chimney is usually interpreted as an indication that someone is at home, while if the same smoke is coming out of a house's window, one immediately thinks that the house may be on fire. Even though substantively the smoke is one and the same, it is likely to condition an array of different reactions in human observers. In addition, even in the same spatio-temporal context the same sign can be interpreted differently by different social subjects. A regular passer-by would not care less about the smoke coming out of a chimney, but someone who has been lost in the woods for several days is likely to interpret it as a sign of the coming salvation. Thus, it is the presence of interpretation of natural phenomena (human or not) that turns them into social phenomena. Of course, we can talk about different degrees of initial 'naturalness': it can be still very natural smoke in the forest or totally made up pattern of tiny coloured particles taking a tangled shape on a sheet made of finely chopped, bleached and pressed pieces of wood, but only interpretation can turn those physical substances into signs of a forest fire and a written letter that precipitates some response that could make sense only within a social context. Social sciences, as their name suggests, study those social contexts, i.e. they study the realms of being and action that are heavily regulated by the production, reproduction and interpretation of signs. They study facts in their social form, i.e. once whatever occurs physically is complemented by interpretation carried out from within a socially shared system of signs (Durkheim 1982).

Interpretivist scholars believe that the most crucial feature of social facts and interpretation is that they can never be said to be completely stable. Of course, there is a fair degree of similarity in how humans

interpret their external environment (this similarity is what makes any kind of community possible). Yet, this similarity never becomes absolute sameness. No doubt, we can relatively confidently presume that most English speakers would pronounce letter 'C' by sequentially uttering sounds [s] and [i], which in their physical form would be pronounced in a similar way across different speakers. At the same time, this same sign will be interpreted differently across different languages, as well as within different situational contexts in the English language. But also, in physical terms, the actual vocal reproduction of this sign by two individuals who learned the language from the same mother would almost never be identical.

The approximation of meaning of a great number of situational contexts across a group of individuals creates collective identities. Yet, even within one collective identity there exist interpretive and reproductive variations that may go all the way down to the smallest fragments of that group. And it is precisely the dialectics of socially constructed similarity and variation that interpretivist social science is interested in, because it considers it to be the 'stuff' of all social phenomena.

Naturally, such understanding of social reality has several implications for the procedures of interpretivist analysis. Because social phenomena are admitted as still having some recognizable shape in various approximated contexts, but, at the same time, are deemed to be irrevocably fluid in both time and space, interpretivist social analysis cannot be two things. It cannot be a-historical, and it cannot be de-contextualized. This means that it cannot base itself on the standards of replicability (which does away with history) and generalizability (which cancels contextual variation). At the same time, interpretivist analysis is itself social, which means that it still needs to be communicated, evaluated and understood within the community of scholars. This requires a set of criteria that, on the one hand, could attest to its quality, but, on the other hand, would allow an appreciation of contextual specificity and reflect on the consequences of the unavoidable social positionality of every researcher. In other words, interpretivist social analysis must still be rigorous and systematic, but it cannot derive its rigor and systematicity from mimicking natural scientific procedures.

### **3 INTERPRETIVIST ALTERNATIVES FOR ASSESSING QUALITY OF SOCIAL RESEARCH**

Then, what kind of sense-making checks should interpretivist social research rely on? Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow (2013) propose two main quality criteria which, if fulfilled, may produce a qualified piece of social analysis: hermeneutic sensitivity and reflexivity. Hermeneutic sensibility, or researcher's susceptibility towards various possible meaning-making process within a research context and the ability to constantly shift analytical efforts from the level of primary sources to the level of meta-analysis, is postulated as necessary for every interpretivist project because the main aim of the latter is to understand "research participants' meaning making in their own settings" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013: 97). It is the dialectics of difference and commonality in the interpretation of social facts that an interpretivist scholar is mostly interested in. Hence, researcher's sensitivity towards interpretive variations behind superficial similarity, as well as interpretive convergence behind seemingly different or conflicting systems of signs, is the most precious characteristic of a truly proficient interpretive undertaking.

Reflexivity is important for every interpretivist project because the key presupposition of the interpretivist turn is that "there is no place to stand outside of the social world that allows a view of truth unmediated by human knowledge and embeddedness in circumstance" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013: 98). Hence, a researcher needs to master several methodological checks on his or her own sense-making, because in a historicized and context-dependent social environment the use of formal procedures that could ensure 'objectification' of one's analysis is no longer possible. For example, one of such checks could be a constant reflection on how the researcher's subject position may influence the research process. Importantly, this reflection must be made explicit, because instead of being an instance of narcissistic navel-gazing, it serves an important methodological function of ensuring transparency of contemplating the impact of researcher's identity on the analytical process and research environment.

Naturally, hermeneutic sensibility and reflexivity should not only be treated as the main quality criteria for evaluating interpretivist work. They are also the most important skills that need to be developed in an interpretivist methods classroom. What is more, these skills often prove to be very difficult to acquire. This is often the case, because hermeneutic sensibility and reflexivity may work

against each other. The former requires a very deep immersion into a studied context that may naturalize the research environment and undermine the researcher’s reflexive capability. The latter presupposes unending self-examination, which may not only undermine the required balance of data treatment, but question the researcher’s analytical capabilities in his or her own eyes.

In this short paper, we do not claim to propose a definitive solution to the challenges that interpretivist learning process, as well as its evaluation, pose in front of us as instructors. Instead, we focus on two very practical aspects that may help the IR scholarly community approach the solution in future. That is, we construct two assignment designs that should help students develop hermeneutic sensibility and reflexivity when dealing with IR-related topics.

## 4 SAMPLE IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES

### 4.1 Uncovering multiplicity of meaning

This exercise exposes students to contingency and contextual variability of meaning, to the researcher’s possible imposition of meaning and the respondent’s contextual reasoning which both affect data generation. The exercise aims to facilitate developing the sense of the dialectics of difference and commonality in interpretive research, specifically that consistency of language/words in use is not equal to uniformity of meaning or equivalence across even similar groups. The inspiration for the exercise is a study in quantitative feminist psychology (Landrine et al 1995) which revealed difference in understanding words describing social behaviour across white women and women of colour and a contribution by Joe Soss (2006) in which he shows variation in understanding the word “number” among clients of welfare agencies (in the sense of having a client number) and how these diverged from his initial assumption. We suggest that these texts are read after the completion of the activity.

*Sequence of class activities:*

1. The instructor and the group together decide on a current international politics event/phenomenon to think of. The class is divided into pairs. Within each pair, one person (the researcher) comes up with 10 evaluative adjectives and short phrases to describe the phenomenon and the other person (the respondent) then puts them in order of importance/analytical value (sample topics and adjectives are provided in Table 1).
2. Each member of the pair separately notes down what these adjectives and phrases mean and reflects briefly on the process of procuring them (the researcher) and ordering them, with suggestions of what seemed missing/irrelevant in the list (the respondent).
3. Each pair then compares their notes to look for similarities and differences in how the phrases were understood.
4. The class as the whole reflects on how the a priori designated parameters of meaning affect data generation and, more conceptually, how superficial similarity may bring out interpretive variations and how we can recognise interpretive convergence behind seemingly different or conflicting systems of signs.

*Example:*

Topic	Evaluative adjectives
ISIS	Manifestly brutal, quasi-state, religious, radical, etc.
Globalization	Borderless, multi-level, unequal, capitalist, etc.
Hybrid war	Digital, undeclared, subversive, etc.

*Table 1. Sample topics and adjectives for the class activity*

### 4.2 Understanding contextual variation for basic concepts

This activity helps students understand that even the basic concepts (such as “change” and “history”, for example) can be approached differently and mean different things depending on the researcher’s ontological and epistemological assumptions about social reality, as well as on the stated purpose of his or her research project. The activity draws on two purposes of theorizing – problem-solving and

critical – identified by Robert Cox (1981), whose article is assigned as a required home reading before the seminar. In very general terms, Cox claims that theory can be either critical or problem-solving. For him, problem-solving theory is conservative and ahistorical. It tries to solve problems within a particular perspective (e.g. liberal internationalist), taking actors, institutions and structures as given and trying to make structures and institutions work more smoothly. Critical theory, on the other hand, is revolutionary and historical. It attempts to achieve a perspective on perspectives by investigating the origins and evolution of institutions, actors and structures. Critical theory may also try to theorize an alternative to the existing order.

*Sequence of class activities:*

1. The instructor shows a list of concepts (Table 2) and invites all students to say a few words on how they understand them. Ideally, the students should give 5 or 6 basic definitions of /reflections on any concepts included into the list.
2. The instructor divides the class into even groups of 5-6 people (but this number may vary – the main goal is to make sure there is even number of groups in the classroom, preferably two or four), and asks each group to take up either critical or problem-solving approach.
3. The instructor offers the groups to select a few concepts and discuss their meaning and operation from within the approach that was assigned to the group (critical or problem-solving).
4. The groups spend 5-10 minutes discussing their take on the selected concepts and then briefly present the group’s position.
5. The group holding the opposite approach is then asked to spontaneously comment on the presentation and then present their own take on the concepts they have discussed. The group that presented first is then asked to respond to the second group presentation.
6. The whole class is then invited to reflect upon transformations that the discussed concepts underwent in their thinking and the influence of their subject position on how those concepts are understood.

History	Actors	Emancipation
Problem	Change	Precision
Awareness	Institutions	Ideology
Values	Social structure	Order

*Table 2. Concepts for evaluation*

*Example:* For a problem-solving approach embedded into the liberal internationalist paradigm, “emancipation” is a prime value, which can be understood in terms of exporting democracy, human rights, gender equality, etc. Here, emancipation is a process of freeing oneself and/or societies from oppressive authoritarian and patriarchal political regimes. On the other hand, for a critical scholar emancipation primarily applies to the oppressed classes (e.g. workers) within a society that does not call it oppression. It is about realisation and achievement of specific class interests that may not be immediately obvious, because the capitalist classes benefit from obscuring and reproducing the power relations that govern the social whole. Alternatively, when it comes to the second generation of critical theorists, emancipation is, first and foremost, about freeing the individual’s mind from the power of all-pervasive ideology.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Today, the discipline of International Relations is freeing itself from scientism that accompanied its early evolution and is gradually embracing new methods and techniques that had previously been developed in history, anthropology, sociology and other related disciplines. Even though this turn is definitive enough to be called irreversible, it has not yet been sufficiently equipped with suitable teaching and learning tools. In this paper, we tried to supply some lacking elements of this process. We designed two IR-specific class activities aimed at developing hermeneutic sensibility and reflexivity in IR students.

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