Interpretation for Positivists

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Abstract

Interpretive and positive approaches to social science are generally believed to be at odds, and combining them is discouraged. In this article, we show what political scientists trained in the positivist tradition can gain from integrating an interpretive approach. We make the case for interpretation in positivist political science, and show how interpretivism can be used to complement positivist inquiry. We focus, in particular, on how interpretivism can answer the questions of human meaning-making that arise in the course of positivist research. We argue that the adoption of an interpretive orientation by positivist researchers can (1) help researchers understand political phenomena in new ways that positivist methods do not encourage; (2) demystify the role of researcher interpretation in the production of theory and research; and (3) create opportunities for creativity in the genre and form of our writing. To develop our argument, we propose three “ideal type” approaches to the adoption of interpretivism within positivist research. For each approach, we delineate the specific contribution of interpretivism; the research problem(s) the approach promises to solve; and the evaluative criteria that should be applied to research of this kind.

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1 Introduction

In a symposium in *World Politics*, Peter Katzenstein admonished that “A sharp distinction between a nomothetic and an idiographic social science...will do little to help us recognize and make intelligible this world of regions” (Kohli et al. 1995). Katzenstein continued that “[A]nybody seeking to answer an important and interesting question would be a fool to sacrifice the insights that can be gleaned from either perspective,” and concluded the point with a metaphor: “Although true that among the blind the one-eyed is king, it is also true that good depth perception requires two eyes.” Social scientists have, in many ways, adopted Katzenstein’s vision, combining methodologies from nomothetic research (focused on generalization) with those from the ideographic tradition (focused on the particular) to reach new scientific insights about the social world. However, the two broadest approaches associated with each tradition – positivism and interpretivism – are rarely combined and thought by many to be incompatible. Our goal in this article is to show what political scientists trained in the positivist tradition might gain by more fully taking up Katzenstein’s invitation.

While we take our arguments to be in the spirit of Katzenstein’s call, we take seriously the cautions against the bridging of positivist and interpretive approaches. Indeed, despite the pragmatism of Katzenstein’s proposal, the prevailing view in the methodological literature and in research practice is that positivism and interpretivism should be kept separate. Positivists, broadly speaking, privilege a set of assumptions and practices that focus on the empirical verification of observable causal relations, while interpretivists privilege assumptions and practices that focus on human meaning-making. In the view of many, the gap between these approaches is so wide that disagreements between their practitioners may spark a paradigmatic contest over the future of social science (Lake 2013).

In this article, however, we build a case for interpretation in positivist social science. We propose, in particular, that an interpretive approach can serve to answer the questions of human meaning-making that arise in the course of positivist research. To develop our case, we begin by articulating the tenets and history of interpretive and positivist approaches to social science. We then offer three “ideal type” combinations of these methodological approaches: (1) supporting role combinations, (2) staged combinations, and (3) integrative combinations. Supporting role
combinations involve the adoption of an interpretive approach at specific substages of positivist research: during the articulation of a research puzzle, for instance, or in the interpretation of particular kinds of results. Combinations (2) and (3) venture further, showing how researchers might conduct satisfying interpretive and positivist investigations in one study. We illustrate each ideal type with examples (when available), and hypotheticals (when not).

With a clearer view of what combinations of interpretive and positive social science might entail, we turn to the benefits of positivist and interpretive combinations. We see advantages, in particular, for creativity in ideas and design, for faithful and demystified accounts of the research process, and for the production of lively, insightful research reports. We conclude with a discussion of the pitfalls and dangers endemic to this enterprise. The gap between these approaches is wide, and attempting to bridge them requires skill in both, an ability to hold their contradictions in productive tension, and a readership willing to go along.

Some scholars from both traditions will disagree with our sanguine outlook on the potential for combination. We are writing, however, not for the committed adherents to either paradigm, but to those, like ourselves, who see compelling arguments for combination but find little support or instruction in the methodological literature about how or when to do so. We are writing, in other words, for those who understand the assumptions associated with positivist and interpretive approaches as a “wager” (Jackson 2010, 34), and for whom the flexibility to move between these assumptions might more accurately reflect their understanding of the social world.1 We do not think we are alone; we cite evidence that scholars are already combining positive and interpretive approaches, perhaps in underrecognized ways.

We do not propose that all, or even most, researchers should combine positivist and interpretive approaches. We do not seek to replace these two epistemic communities with a single episteme, and we want to preserve space for research that falls firmly within either tradition. We believe, however, that there is value in bridging these approaches under certain conditions, and

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1 As quoted in Schmidt (2021, 7): “As Patrick Jackson has suggested, the indeterminacy of the world warrants a “wager” on the ontological position that seems most likely to be the case: “The methodological principle is that we should regard positions on the character and conduct of science as resting on provisional commitments – wagers – about matters of philosophical ontology that can really never be settled definitively” (Jackson 2010, 34).” For those who understand either set of ontological assumptions as correct representations of the social world, we recommend that they stick to the positivist or interpretive framework that accompanies their understanding.
we want to see more scholars drawing from both traditions when appropriate. In what follows, we aim to specify how. As a practical argument, the ultimate verdict on our intervention will come from practice; whether other scholars find resonance with our arguments and combine interpretive and positive approaches more intentionally and explicitly in their work.

2 Tenets and History

We conceive of interpretive and positive social science as contrasting methodological approaches, a term we use to refer to a framework of inquiry based on philosophical assumptions about the nature of the social world and the place of knowledge production within it. Methods, by distinction, refer to the research and analytical practices and tools that researchers use to arrive at clearer understandings of phenomena of interest. While certain practices and tools are perceived to share an affinity with either interpretivism or positivism, methods are not inherently linked to either set of assumptions.2

Our goal in this article is to establish when positivists might benefit from the adoption of an interpretive methodological approach. As Pachirat (2006) succinctly describes the enterprise, interpretivism involves “humans making meaning out of the meaning making of other humans.” To adopt an interpretive approach, as we understand it, is to be concerned with how people perceive and ascribe meaning to their social worlds. It starts with a close attention to the meaning and significance of symbols, choices of words, and taken-for-granted assumptions—without prejudging how these meanings will relate to the research later. It requires reflection on the range of possible alternative interpretations, and on the role of the researcher—her position, background knowledge, and internal reactions—in shaping her own interpretations.

This approach is premised on a set of philosophical assumptions about ontology (the nature of human or social reality) and epistemology (whether and how that reality might be known). Within the interpretive tradition, social entities are culturally mediated and do not enjoy an existence independent of the observer (i.e., they are not objectively “real”). These entities are

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2 Consider, for instance, the compatibilities between experimental methods and (positivist) causal explanations, or between ethnography and the aims of interpretivism. For more on the methods that share an affinity with interpretive research, see Yanow (2006, xix).
therefore not knowable through external ("objective") observation—hence the interpretivist emphasis on practices and meanings.

Interpretivism is, of course, a capacious and contested term, but this focus on meaning-making highlights the core orientation that most interpretivists share. In our eyes, this emphasis on meaning distinguishes the approach from positivism, which emphasizes objectivity as a key methodological stance for researchers, and causal inference as the purpose of science. Although the term “positivist” is contested and perhaps inaccurate, “the label has stuck despite the attempt to modify it with various prefixes (e.g. neopositivism)” (Lake 2013, 578). The term, and tradition, are linked to the philosophical logical positivism of Popper and are subject to vigorous critique (Hawkesworth 2015), but current research practices rarely involve the strict falsification of Popper. Instead, positivists are united by a worldview that consists in the belief that “research and researchers can separate themselves from reality and objectively observe the world they inhabit, that science is and should be limited to observable implications and factors, and that the purpose of science is causal inference” (Lake 2013, 578).³ In the language of ontology and epistemology, positivists view outcomes of interest as objectively “real” and, therefore, as “knowable” through external observation.

Decades of vigorous debate around the role of methods and methodologies have resulted in the proliferation of “mixed-methods” research. Scholars now routinely deploy qualitative, quantitative, and formal-theoretic approaches in the same piece of research, leveraging the strengths of each to offset the weaknesses of others. Methodological advice for combining methods is increasingly sophisticated (Humphreys and Jacobs 2015, Seawright 2016), and mixed-methods research is seen by many as a strategy for overcoming the limitations of single-method research.⁴

Advances in mixed-method research find parallels in calls for pragmatic openness to methodological pluralism. Adam Przeworski, for instance, describes his approach to

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³ We should note that here, too, there is contestation: Lake continues that “Within these beliefs, of course, there is disagreement about the precise meanings of key terms, especially about what constitutes an adequate causal explanation” (Lake 2013, 578).

⁴ On the risks of this stance, see Ahmed and Sil (2012).
methodology in mercenary terms: “I am a methodological opportunist who believes in doing or using whatever works. If game theory works, I use it. If what is called for is a historical account, I do that. If deconstruction is needed, I will even try deconstruction. So I have no principles.” (Kohli et al. 1995). Advocates for this kind of eclecticism have suggested that seemingly contradictory worldviews might be productively combined. Katzenstein and Sil, for example, argue for modes of eclectic scholarship that “trespass deliberately and liberally across competing research traditions with the intention of defining and exploring substantive problems in original, creative ways” (Katzenstein and Sil 2008). The result—what they term, “analytic eclecticism”—is distinguished by the fact that “features of analyses…embedded in separate research traditions can be separated from their respective foundations, translated meaningfully, and recombined” to create original and pragmatic scholarship—a scholarship that “eschews metatheoretical debates” and that engages different traditions in “meaningful conversations about substantive problems.”

Despite these calls for analytic eclecticism, advocates and practitioners of positivist and interpretivist combinations have been rare. Indeed, only a handful of studies call for the combination of interpretive and positive social science. Most related to our paper is Roth and Mehta (2002), who conduct parallel interpretive and positive investigations of several school shootings as a model for how researchers might achieve a “Rashomon effect,” by seeing the same phenomenon from different points of view (see also Heider 1988). Lin (1998) also anticipates our call for combination, but focuses only on the strengths of interpretive approaches for tracing causal mechanisms. We aim to extend these works by developing a broader typology of combinations, introducing the role of evaluative criteria, and considering a wider range of benefits (and challenges) inherent to this task.

Aside from these few calls for cross-pollination between interpretive and positivist approaches, most scholars who endorse mixed methodologies remain skeptical of this enterprise. Ahmed and Sil argue that combinations of positive and interpretive approaches offer no “distinctive advantage over a collection of separate studies” because “these approaches are predicated on fundamentally distinct ontologies and conceptions of causality, the findings they generate are ultimately incommensurable and do not serve to strengthen each other” (Ahmed
and Sil 2012, 936). Others are even more direct: Sale, Lohfeld, and Brazil (2002, 47), for instance, declare that “one cannot be both a positivist and an interpretivist.”

Even these skeptics, however, do not entirely foreclose the potential for complementarity between positivist and interpretive approaches: “[T]he fact that the approaches are incommensurate does not mean that multiple methods cannot be combined in a single study if it is done for complementary purposes. Each method studies different phenomena” (Sale, Lohfeld, and Brazil 2002, 50). This recommendation is not fleshed out, but it presages our approach, which is to employ interpretive and positive approaches to address the sub-questions within a research investigation that they are best equipped to answer.

Before we begin, we should note that we will not provide much by way of a “how-to” for interpretive research. We do not provide a checklist, nor do we devise a list of interpretive best practices. This is intentional. Part of the appeal of interpretivism lies in its improvisational character—its “ambiguities, openness, and relative lack of control(s)” (Schwartz-Shea 2006, 84). This may, of course, prove frustrating for readers trained in the positivist tradition, many of whom will have received limited exposure to interpretive research in their graduate training. With this in mind, we try as best we can to describe the aims of interpretivism, and the kinds of questions and data to which interpretivists might attend. Throughout, we also point to examples of interpretive research in our discipline. Ultimately, however, and as with much else, we must learn by doing. We hope to persuade you to take the risk.

### 3 How to Combine?

We propose that researchers should consider interpretation for investigations of meaning and positivism for investigations of causation. The balance should depend on the relative importance of meaning and causation for understanding the social phenomenon of interest. The evaluative

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5 For a more extended discussion of the relationship between improvisation and rigor in interpretive research, see Yanow (2006, 67-89).

6 For an interpretivist’s reflection on how to describe the aims of interpretive work to positivists, see Cramer (2012; 2015). See also Cramer’s guidance to researchers trying interpretive work for the first time (2016, 42-44).
criteria, in turn, should depend on the role that each approach plays in the analysis. Researchers should be prepared to defend the practical value of their insights against the challenges of deploying approaches that may not be fully commensurable. The rest of this section develops each of these claims.

**Causation vs. Meaning**

Scholars working within the interpretivist tradition have specialized in investigations of meaning. For Adcock, “interpretive social science is usually, and correctly, associated with situated efforts to understand the meaningful character that action has for those whose action it is: the characteristic question in such scholarship is, ‘What do, or did, these people believe themselves to be doing?’” (Adcock 2006, 61). Yanow is even more direct, noting that if one starts with the premise that, “social reality is multifold, that its interpretation is shaped by one’s experience with that reality,” then “interpretation (of acts, language, and objects) is the only method appropriate…when the research question concerns matters of human meaning” (Yanow 2006, 23).

Interpretivists can, of course, examine questions of cause, but tend to seek understanding within specific settings. These explanations generally take the form of a “constitutive” causality, that seeks to “explain events in terms of actors’ understandings of their own contexts, rather than in terms of a more mechanistic causality” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013, 52). Scholars in the positivist tradition, on the other hand, have specialized in exactly these kinds of mechanistic explanations. Positivists seek to establish causation, and have tended to gravitate toward methods (e.g. experimental methods, statistics, and process tracing) that share an affinity with causal explanations. The scholarship that results is more concerned with causal inferences than with the explication of contextually situated meanings.

This distinction between meaning-focused (interpretive) and cause-focused (positivist) research, however, blurs the role of questions of meaning in some positivist research. The extent

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to which positivists depend on meaning is, to some extent, determined by the nature of scientific evidence about the empirical phenomena of interest. When this scientific evidence is directly observable (How many votes? How much taxation?), researchers can and should proceed within a positivist framework.\(^8\) Sometimes, however, this evidence requires answers to questions of meaning. Such situations arise, for instance, when concepts do not map cleanly onto their empirical referent, or when a researcher must infer intentions or motivations from observable actions (What norms are at play? Which speeches use emotive rhetoric?). In many ways, these situations are the target of our intervention. When questions of meaning arise in positivist research, we believe that an interpretive approach might offer answers.

**The Essential Role of Evaluative Criteria**

Before we outline how positivists might leverage an interpretive approach, however, we discuss how to evaluate the result. Positivist evaluative criteria will be familiar to scholars trained in the positivist tradition. These criteria prioritize the reliability and validity of measurements, the precision and generality of arguments, the replicability of the research, and the internal and external validity of the analysis.\(^9\)

Interpretivists, on the other hand, have begun to systematize their own standards in response the allegation that there are no criteria for judging interpretive research—the “anything goes” charge (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, 91). The most commonly invoked criteria are those proposed by Schwartz-Shea (2006), which include expectations of “thick description,” “trustworthiness,” reflexivity, and triangulation.\(^10\) While the necessity of established criteria is contested, \(^\text{\footnotesize 8}^\)

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\(^8\) An interpretivist might respond that even entities like votes and taxes do not enjoy a “real” existence independent of how people think of them. According to the interpretive perspective on the reality (ontology) of phenomena of interest and their knowability (epistemology), “there are no “real” social entities, only culturally mediated social facts” (Schaffer 2015, 2). While taking this interpretivist rejoinder seriously, we operate under the assumption that some forms of evidence are commonsensical enough to warrant treatment as directly observable.

\(^9\) For an extended discussion of positivist evaluative criteria, see Gerring (2012, 15, 80-103).

\(^10\) Schwartz-Shea (2006, 101-103) describes thick description as the presence of “sufficient detail of an event, setting, person, or interaction” to capture context-specific nuances and to support the researcher’s interpretations. Trustworthiness offers a way to talk about “the many steps that researchers take
interactivists agree that interpretive research should not be evaluated by positivist standards (Schwartz-Shea 2006, 91), and that interpretive work must be judged on its own terms if it is “to be treated as a legitimate alternative to research informed by methodological positivism” (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, 381).

Distinct interpretive criteria, then, afford interpretive research explicit recognition as interpretive work, but complicate the task of combination. A scholar who brings positive and interpretive orientations to their work must engage two distinct communities with distinct understandings of “good” research. For positivists, the decision to engage both communities may depend on a cost-benefit analysis: is the payoff from the interpretive approach worth the challenge of convincing both audiences that the research is valuable?

We alleviate this problem in two ways. First, we aim to increase the perceived value of speaking to both communities by outlining when and how positivists might adopt an interpretive approach. Second, we hope to decrease the challenge of speaking to both communities with guidance on how combinations of interpretive and positivist approaches should be evaluated.

A Spectrum of Investigations

In what follows, we present a spectrum that ranges from investigations of cause to investigations of meaning. Each pole represents the standard approach to research within the interpretive or positivist tradition, and we suspect that most research can (and should) remain within either epistemic community. Between these two poles, however, we identify three “ideal type” combinations of positivist and interpretive approaches: supporting role combinations, staged combinations, and integrative combinations. These combinations embrace the promise of throughout the research process to ensure that their efforts are self-consciously deliberate, transparent, and ethical.” Reflexivity consists in a “keen awareness of, and theorizing about, the role of the self in all phases of the research process.” Triangulation, finally, implies sensitivity to multiple forms or genres of data. For a full explication of these criteria and their intellectual history, see Schwartz-Shea (2006, 89-113).

11 For the dangers of systematized interpretive criteria, see Pachirat (2014, 377). On the erroneous application of positivist criteria to interpretive research, Yanow writes that “rigor and objectivity are invoked by reviewers (of journal submissions, grant proposals, etc.), typically to undermine a piece of work that is seen as not adhering to some protocol” (Yanow 2006b, 82).
interpretation for positivist research, and correspond to the different ways in which researchers might incorporate interpretivism into positivist work.

The three combinations fall into two broad categories: supporting role combinations concern the adoption of an interpretive orientation for specific substages of positivist research, while staged and integrative combinations involve, in different ways, the inclusion of satisfying interpretive and positivist investigations within a single study. For each type of combination, we delineate the specific contribution of the interpretive approach; the research problem(s) the ideal type promises to solve; and the evaluative criteria that should be applied to research of this kind.

**Supporting Role Combinations**

At its core, an interpretive approach focuses on how people ascribe meaning to their experiences and contexts. Supporting role combinations incorporate this focus on meaning into subcomponents of positivist research. In these combinations, scholars use interpretation to produce knowledge for research in a positivist framework.

One way to do this is to bring an interpretive orientation to the early stages of a research project—noticing (and recording) the moments and details that catch one’s attention, and reflecting on the meanings embedded in these observations, and on how they might inform the questions and theoretical conclusions of the research.\(^\text{12}\) By examining these details and their significance in this way, an interpretive approach can help us to uncover new patterns of variation, and to identify new lines of inquiry into disciplinary debates. An interpretive orientation, then, can uncover new problems, questions, and insights (or “hunches”) ripe for positivist empirical inquiry.

Take, for instance, the radicalization of Muslim clerics. The way we understand this process depends in large part on our vantage point. In one respect, the radicalization of clerics is

\(^{12}\) The details to which the researcher might attend are wide-ranging. For an exemplary interpretive analysis of rhetoric and symbols, see Wedeen’s *Ambiguites of Domination* (1999). For interpretivism focused on the meanings of everyday language, see Schaffer’s *Democracy in Translation* (1998). See Yanow (1996; 2006, 349-367) for an interpretive analysis of built space and architecture. See also Fujii’s (2015) discussion of the unplanned moments in fieldwork that generate insight into the research context—observations from everyday interactions, for instance, or stories shared by locals.
simply one instantiation of the broader and familiar concept of radicalization. Thinking in this way leads scholars toward existing psychological and experiential theories of radicalization. Up close, however, cleric radicalization looks somewhat different (Nielsen 2017). Jihadist clerics style themselves as scholars, and take pride in their academic biographies and citation counts. Usama bin Laden and other jihadist leaders take photographs and deliver sermons positioned in front of bookshelves, a choice that will be familiar to academics. They produce syllabi, one of which Nielsen translates and reproduces as part of his analysis. They refer to associated dissidents as their “students.”

This understanding of jihadist clerics as academics leads us away from existing models of radicalization, and toward the norms, practices, and politics of Islamic legal academia. What kind of career trajectories do Muslim clerics seek? What are the experiences of those who fail to realize these ambitions? These questions highlight an overlooked aspect of cleric radicalization: namely, the surprisingly mundane set of academic career pressures that can push clerics toward militant jihadism. This interpretive insight can be productively mined in a positivist inquiry; indeed, Nielsen (2017) proceeds to examine these claims through a combination of standard positivist approaches: regression analysis and case studies. In this approach to combination, an interpretive orientation in fieldwork (“trying to see jihadists as they see themselves”) uncovers a theoretical insight (a cleric-specific pathway of radicalization centered on “blocked ambition”) that lends itself to inquiry within a positivist framework.

An interpretative orientation, however, can do more for positivists than this. In particular, interpretation can also inform elements of research design within positivist research. By unpacking the meanings and uses of concepts in contexts of interest, an interpretive approach can serve as a bridge between abstract concepts and empirical realities. In so doing, interpretation can inform the processes of classification, measurement, and operationalization that enable positivist inquiry.

Take, by way of illustration, Thachil’s (2018) examination of the degree to which ethnic differences divide migrants of similar class profiles in India. In this study, Thachil uses the language, practices, and experiences of migrants to operationalize abstract concepts of interest (“competition,” “cooperation,” “informal leadership”) into contextually resonant vignettes
(using, for instance, the practice of rate-cutting, or “rate-katna” to operationalize competition, and using union leaders, “chowks,” to operationalize informal leadership). This attunement to local language improved the construct and ecological validity of the experimental vignette.

If used in this way, an interpretive orientation could help to operationalize and measure concepts in ways that resonate with their meanings in particular contexts. In this version of a supporting role combination, interpretation would inform tasks like classification, operationalization, and measurement—elements that are constitutive of positivist inquiry.

A third approach to supporting role combinations could involve the incorporation of interpretation into analysis within positivist research. Consider, for example, the interpretation of statistical topic models and open-ended survey responses. Often, these exercises aim to understand the meanings humans try to convey through text and speech. Although this research tends to be formulated within a positivist framework, these exercises are fundamentally interpretive tasks. By situating these tasks within a positivist framework, researchers deny the actual role of interpretation, as well as the value it may contribute to the research. In a supporting role combination, however, a researcher could intentionally adopt an interpretive orientation for these interpretive tasks. Such an approach would recognize and describe the fundamentally human character of the inquiry, and the extent to which conclusions drawn depend on the creativity, reactions, and interpretations of the researcher.

As should be clear from our depictions of these approaches, supporting role combinations do not necessarily involve the kind of systematic interpretive investigation of meaning that characterizes typical interpretive work. Nielsen (2017) describes the ways in which Muslim clergy make meaning out of their careers through the lens of the Islamic scholarly tradition, but does not examine the origins of this tradition. Thachil (2018) did not deeply explore how the practice of rate-katna came to be salient, nor did he consider how chowks are situated within local power relationships. What interpretivism does contribute, however, is knowledge for research in a

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13 On topic model applications in political science, see, e.g., Grimmer and Stewart (2013).

14 This is not a criticism. It does suggest, however, that the value of supporting role combinations lies in harnessing an interpretive orientation to the aims of positivist research, rather than in the balanced integration of the two approaches.
positivist framework. Researchers deliberatively adopt an interpretive orientation when interpretation stands to contribute to positivist research—whether in the early stages (how do I explain this phenomenon?), design (how do I operationalize this concept?), or analysis phase of research (how do I draw conclusions from these data?). The researcher is attuned to details --- language, symbols, local knowledge --- and to their meanings and implications for the particular stage of the research. Throughout, the researcher is intentional about the use of interpretation, and explicit in her description of its contributions to the research.

As evidenced by our examples in this section, we believe there is research within political science that is similar in spirit to supporting role combinations. Indeed, our case for supporting role combinations resonates strongly with the recent wave of interest in an “ethnographic sensibility” in the discipline (Pader 2006; Schatz 2009, Pearlman 2015).15 Where supporting role combinations differ from this research, however, is that they also include an explicit description of the role of interpretation. In a supporting role combination, the researcher might, for instance, describe the moment of interpretive insight that sparked the theory, or the extent to which conclusions drawn from data depend on their background knowledge and prior experiences. The value of such descriptions, as we see it, is research that more faithfully describes what these interpretive tasks entail, and what they can practically achieve.

Importantly, this depiction of the potential forms of supporting role combinations does not offer clear evaluative criteria. By and large, we recommend positivist evaluative standards for the evaluation of these combinations. Such evaluations would ask, for instance, how accurately concepts summarize the characteristics of particular phenomena, or about the reliability of the various measurements and replicability of the analyses—questions familiar to scholars trained within the positivist tradition.

This is not to say, however, that the interpretive components are free from criticism. Rather, the interpretive components should be evaluated on two dimensions: first, the extent to which interpretation contributed to the positivist research (e.g., Did the interpretive insight

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15 To adopt an ethnographic sensibility is to be interested in how actors perceive and make sense their contexts and experiences. For an explication of the term as we use it, see Pader (2006, 161-176). For examples of research guided by an ethnographic sensibility in political science, see, e.g., Jourde (2009, 201-216), Pearlman (2013, 2016), Bishara (2015, 2021), Krause (2018, 2019), Simmons (2018), Parkinson (2021).
produce relevant variables? Did interpretation produce reliable conclusions in the analysis?), and second, the extent to which these components enable the reader to share in the revelatory interpretive insight (e.g., Was the reader “brought along” with the interpretive move?).

This recommendation for evaluation reflects our understanding of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of supporting role combinations. In particular, we propose that supporting role combinations share positivist philosophical assumptions, which understand research as objective and in pursuit of “truth” in an external social world. Interpretation, in other words, contributes to particular tasks within the positivist investigation, but does not unseat the philosophical assumptions that undergird the research. We will return to address the possibility of ontological and epistemological contradiction in the combinations that follow. On this point, these combinations will raise significantly more challenges.

**Staged Combinations**

An interpretive orientation brings researchers closer to the meanings people ascribe to their experiences. Staged combinations use this closeness to gain explanatory purchase on outcomes of interest. In these combinations, researchers conduct an interpretive investigation to identify meaningful categories. These categories, in turn, serve as independent variables in positivist tests.

An interpretive approach is particularly well-suited to the task of identifying salient categories and their consequences in particular contexts. Lisa Wedeen, for instance, explains that “[t]he task of an interpretivist is often to analyze the sort of work done by categories such as black and white or Sunni and Shi’i—that is, to analyze the logic of the relationships and the effects of the categories—while accounting for how they come to seem natural and taken-for-granted, when they do” (Wedeen 2002, 260). In staged combinations, the researcher would first identify and account for meaningful categories or classifications within an interpretive investigation. The researcher would then use the categories identified in the interpretive investigation as explanatory variables in positivist hypotheses and tests. Staged combinations, then, involve a transition from an interpretive to positivist framework within the research: the positivist investigation examines the observable implications of categories identified in interpretive research.
What distinguishes supporting role from staged combinations is that the interpretive investigation of categories should aim to satisfy an interpretive audience. In supporting role combinations, researchers do not conduct more interpretation than is required for the positivist research. Staged combinations, by contrast, involve a systematic investigation of meaning before the positivist investigation. This investigation of meaning might consider, for instance, how these categories and classifications emerged, how they were promulgated and made meaningful, whether and to what extent they are contested, and how the researcher came to discover these categories, among other lines of inquiry.\textsuperscript{16}

When might a staged combination be useful for positivist researchers? In particular, we recommend this approach when the empirical phenomena of interest are not accessible to direct observation—in other words, when we cannot straightforwardly extract relevant and serviceable variables from the direct observation and measurement of a political or social phenomenon.\textsuperscript{17} Staged combinations bring our interpretive faculties to bear on this problem of observation, such that we might uncover theoretically relevant categories and classifications and gain explanatory purchase on the phenomena we study.

This recommendation raises an important point about the execution of staged combinations. In supporting role combinations, researchers pursue the positivist investigation until they encounter or anticipate a task that might benefit from interpretation, at which point they adopt an interpretive orientation. In staged combinations, however, researchers must commit to an interpretive investigation at the outset of the research. This investigation should share the trademarks of interpretive social science which, as Pachirat describes, consist in “[a]n openness to messiness; a high tolerance of ambiguity; the intentional cultivation of new lines of sight through an expansion of literary and experiential resources; the disciplined practice of maintaining a state of childlike wonder and awe over what one encounters; an intentional

\textsuperscript{16} The possible lines of inquiry within the interpretive investigation are wide-ranging. See, for instance, Yanow (2014) on the foci of interpretive research: “It requires accessing what is meaningful to social, political, cultural, and other groups, and to individuals within them, as well as understanding how meaning is developed, expressed, and communicated.”

\textsuperscript{17} Recall, for instance, our earlier examples of norms and emotive rhetoric.
reflexive attention to the internal reactions, including the emotional reactions, experienced by the researcher; an appreciation for the way in which a situation always already interacts with the presence of the researcher and is never revisited in the same way twice; a commitment to keep the research question in flux and to avoid premature evidentiary closure” (Pachirat, 2014).

Where staged combinations depart from interpretive social science, however, is that at some point within the research, the researcher decides to trade in her interpretive hat for a positivist orientation. At this point, the researcher decides to treat as “real” and measurable the categories identified within interpretive research, in order to develop more abstract and generalizable explanations for phenomena of interest. The researcher, in other words, moves away from the goal of understanding a specific setting (e.g., the kind of “constitutive” causality favored by interpretivists), toward the abstraction and aims of positivist social science. This transition from an interpretive to positivist framework, of course, raises the question of ontological and epistemological contradiction, and it is at this point that we should resume the discussion from the previous section.

In staged combinations, an interpretive investigation of categories is followed by a positivist investigation. This positivist investigation treats the categories identified with an interpretive approach as real and observable entities. Interpretivism, however, is premised on the belief that data can only be accessed, or co-generated, through interactions between researcher and researched. Philosophically, then, the interpretive investigation in a staged combination cannot reveal directly observable entities that are external to the researcher. This renders inconsistent the use of interpretative categories in positivist tests, which treat the social world as observable, and research as capable of revealing objectively existing patterns of cause-and-effect. As a result, there are epistemological and ontological contradictions inherent in staged combinations.

Rather, than treating these contradictions as barriers to entry, however, we propose that researchers use staged combinations as an opportunity to address and describe these

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18 As interpretivists have pointed out, what transpires in the interaction between researcher and subject of research depends in large part on who the researcher is and what they bring to the field. As Katherine Cramer puts it, there is no way “to remove ‘me’ from the analysis” (Cramer 2015, 19).
contradictions with critical awareness by specifying the philosophical assumptions that undergird each stage of the research. Our hope is that by explicitly identifying (and bracketing) the contradictions involved in the transition between interpretive and positivist frameworks, we might so expand our methodological possibilities that what is gained in explanatory purchase outweighs what is lost in philosophical coherence.

Philosophical contradictions aside, how should staged combinations be judged? We recommend two metrics of evaluation for staged combinations. First, we propose that the interpretive investigation of categories should be evaluated as a standalone piece of interpretive research. Second, we propose that the positivist investigation of observable implications should be evaluated with positivist evaluative criteria. In recommending that interpretive components be judged on their own terms, our aim is not to suggest that there are (or should be) definitive criteria for the evaluation of interpretive work. Timothy Pachirat outlines the risks of such a position: “The impulse to “KKV-ize” the interpretive orientation—that is, to force the wild, messy intercropping of criteria and practices that is the interpretive orientation into tamed, monocropped rows—might very well prove fatal to what it is that makes interpretive approaches so fertile to begin with” (Pachirat 2014, 377).

Our aim with this recommendation, rather, is to suggest that the interpretive components in these combinations need explicit recognition as interpretive research. We referred above to Schwartz-Shea’s evaluative criteria as commonly invoked interpretive standards, but note that these criteria remain up for debate, and that the evaluation of interpretive approaches will depend, ultimately, on the “attractiveness and persuasiveness of what they contribute” (Pachirat 2014, 377).

**Integrative Combinations**

In our third and final approach to combination, researchers conduct an interpretive investigation of meaning alongside a positivist investigation of cause-and-effect. Where staged combinations

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19 The specification of epistemological and ontological assumptions may be an unfamiliar task for many positivist researchers. This is because positivist assumptions tend to be treated as given in much of the discipline, so stating them is deemed unnecessary.
involve the sequential arrangement of the interpretive and positivist components, integrative combinations link the positivist and interpretive components throughout the research.

By way of illustration, consider a positivist investigation of the relationship between X and Y. In an integrative combination, the researcher would explore interpretive questions alongside the positivist investigation. These questions might, for instance, examine how everyday language reveals multiple or contested meanings of X, or what filmic or symbolic representations of Y reveals about power relationships in the context of interest, and so on. This interpretive investigation is distinct from the positivist investigation, but is set alongside this positivist research to enrich our overall understanding of the relationship between X and Y.

The promise of this combination is to avoid the “tunnel vision” that positivism might encourage in the investigation of X and Y. In integrative combinations, researchers remain open to elements of an interpretive orientation throughout the research—they retain, in other words, an attention to meaning-making, a commitment to messiness and ambiguity, and a reflexive attention to their own position and internal reactions. The strictures of positivist research do, of course, place limits on the extent of these commitments, and we will return to this tradeoff in our discussion of the pitfalls of combination. For now, though, we can summarize the essence of integrative combinations as the commitment to interpretive ways of seeing throughout the positivist research, and to the investigation of the questions that are generated by this commitment.

Like staged combinations, integrative combinations cannot resolve the philosophical contradictions inherent in the use of positivist and interpretive approaches in one study. Integrative combinations, in particular, require the researcher (and reader) to hold complex and inconsistent views on the nature of causality as they move between the positivist investigation (e.g., Does X objectively cause Y?) and the interpretive investigation (e.g., Where did the meaning of X come from? In what ways is this meaning contested?). We recommend the explicit description of the interpretive and positivist assumptions that undergird each line of inquiry, and the intentional bracketing of the alternative assumptions within each interpretive and positivist investigation.
Regarding the evaluation of integrative combinations, we recommend interpretive evaluative criteria for the interpretive investigation, and positive evaluative criteria for the positivist investigation. The researcher should specify the criteria that pertain to each investigation. As with staged combinations, this recommendation is premised on the understanding that the interpretive investigation should be evaluated on its own terms.

To recapitulate these arguments, this section offers three approaches to the adoption of interpretivism within positivist research. These approaches differ in (1) the role of interpretation; (2) the problems that interpretation stands to solve; (3) the relevant standards for evaluation; and (4) the presence of philosophical contradiction. Table 1 provides an overview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideal Type</th>
<th>Role of Interpretation</th>
<th>Problems Solved by Interpretation</th>
<th>Evaluative Criteria</th>
<th>Philosophical Contradiction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Role</td>
<td>Interpretation assists with tasks in positivist research.</td>
<td>Interpretation solves problems within positivist tasks.</td>
<td>Positivist criteria.</td>
<td>No. Interpretation does not unseat positivist assumptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staged</td>
<td>Interpretation generates categories for positivist investigation.</td>
<td>Interpretation solves the problem of unobservable explanatory variables.</td>
<td>Interpretive criteria (investigation of categories) and positivist criteria (investigation of implications).</td>
<td>Yes. Interpretive assumptions for the interpretive investigation; positivist assumptions for the positivist investigation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrative</td>
<td>The interpretive investigation accompanies the positivist research.</td>
<td>Interpretation solves the problem of positivist “tunnel vision.”</td>
<td>Interpretive criteria (interpretive investigation) and positivist criteria (positivist investigation).</td>
<td>Yes. Interpretive assumptions for the interpretive investigation; positivist assumptions for the positivist investigation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 The Benefits of Combination for Positivists

In this section, we outline the benefits of incorporating interpretation into positivist research. We argue that (1) by revealing new variation and topics for inquiry, our ideal type combinations can generate more creative positivist research; (2) by describing the contributions of interpretation, they can demystify the role of interpretation in the production of theory and research; and (3) by relying on data with rich information about the social world, they create more opportunities for lively writing about that social world.

Creativity

Perhaps the single most important benefit of combination is creativity in the generation of ideas. As Pachirat (2016) explains, “A serious omission in much graduate education is a sustained conversation about that black box that every researcher at one time or another must confront: How do I get/find/have a good idea?” Pachirat continues that “One of the interpretive orientation’s most attractive contributions, I believe, is an environment especially hospitable to the work of imaginative theorizing, of crafting genuinely new and exciting ideas, of nourishing the “playfulness of mind” so necessary to the goodness of social science.”

We believe that the adoption of an interpretive “playfulness of mind” is conducive to the discovery of problems and insights worthy of positivist inquiry. To adopt an interpretive orientation is to embrace the idea that we can enrich our questions and theories by paying attention to the meanings people ascribe to their contexts and actions. For positivists, this means being attuned to the details that matter “in the field,” and letting their meanings guide us toward the kind of puzzling variation that makes for good positivist research. (Here, we use “in the field” in a broad sense, applicable both to extended stays in contexts of interest, but also to interviews and the consultation of texts and cultural artifacts).

Besides the generation of creative theories, an interpretive orientation can also assist in the design and analysis phases of positivist research. We suspect that the creative benefits of an interpretive mindset accrue at all stages of research—whether in the design of creative operationalizations and measurements, or in the form of enhanced attunement to the conclusions to be drawn from text and speech data.
This argument is, of course, open to a powerful rejoinder: Why invest time and resources in the cultivation of interpretive ways of seeing? Why not leave interpretation to interpretivists and read interpretive work? Certainly, positivists have much to learn from interpretive research. We believe, however, that there is something to be gained when positivists adopt an interpretive orientation themselves. Positivists approach interpretation with professional specialization in issues of cause and generalizability, and an attunement to empirical variation. Combined with an interpretive orientation, this specialization may unlock lines of inquiry that differ from those pursued by scholars trained within the interpretive tradition. Creativity, we suspect, lies in the juxtaposition of a positivist sensibility with interpretive ways of seeing.

**Demystification**

Our ideal type combinations require the explicit description of the contributions of an interpretive approach. Writing explicitly about the role of interpretation in the production of positivist research stands to demystify the research process. These accounts would uncover the role of interpretation in various stages of research, from the discovery of theoretical insights, to the design and execution of the analysis.

This argument about demystification builds on calls within anthropology for the exploration of the “revelatory moments” that arise during fieldwork. Trigger, Forsey and Meurk (2012) define these moments as unplanned and “intense subjective experiences” that generate insight into the context of interest. Trigger et al. (2012, 516-525) illustrate the value of these moments with vignettes from their own fieldwork—accounts which demystify the process by which the researchers arrived at their understandings.  

We propose that descriptions of the moment(s) of interpretive insight are particularly valuable for discussions of theory. In most positivist research in political science, the process of

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20 Lee Ann Fujii (2015) uses the concept of revelatory moments to make her case for “accidental ethnography,” which involves the unplanned moments that take place outside of interviews, surveys, and other structured methods. These moments—the overheard stories, for instance, or observations of everyday scenes—serve to deepen the researcher’s understanding of the research context. Fujii encourages researchers to be systematic in capturing these “accidental” moments during fieldwork. We build on Fujii’s argument, and encourage researchers who combine interpretive and positivist approaches to be systematic in their descriptions of their theoretically generative moments in written research.
theory generation remains absent from the final research report. An extended discussion of the moment(s) of interpretive insight that sparked a theory could offer insight into an underexamined (and undertaught) aspect of the research process.

Besides insight into the generation of theory, there are broader benefits to describing the contributions of interpretation. In some cases, we suspect that this description would provide a more faithful account of what positivists actually do. This is likely the case, for instance, in research that uses interpretation in the analysis of topic models (and which could, as we have argued, fall into the category of supporting role combinations). The benefit here is simple: to the extent that we already rely on interpretation, we should recognize that fact rather than deny it.

In other cases, however, we think these descriptions could expand our understanding of the productive potential of interpretation within positivist research. This would be the case, for instance, with research that relies on an interpretive orientation to uncover theoretically relevant and previously unobservable variation for positivist tests (i.e., “staged” combinations), or research that explores interpretive lines of inquiry alongside a positivist investigation (i.e., “integrative” combinations).

Presentation
A third and possibly overlooked benefit concerns the genre and form of writing. Data collected within an interpretive approach to empirical inquiry (e.g., ethnographic field-notes, stories, poems, jokes, visual and speech data, reflexive memos, etc.) retain more rich and variegated information about the social world than do quantitative renderings of the object of interest. These data are more conducive to thick and vivid description than standardized academic writing.

These data also raise a related question about the structure of written research. Should the researcher incorporate data collected with an interpretive approach into the long-standing tradition of deductive and linear academic writing? Or should the researcher experiment with alternative structures and genres of writing?

21 For alternatives to deductive and linear academic writing, see, for instance, Pachirat’s Every Twelve Seconds (2012), an interpretive ethnography written in narrative format, and Among Wolves (2017), a methods text written as a play. For Pachirat’s discussion of his choice of writing style, see Every Twelve Seconds (2012, 18-19).
Importantly, these questions and opportunities are not just presentational: academic writing structured by a deductive and linear analytical argument underplays the complexities of the social world. Writing that captures the contradictions, ambiguities, and multiplicities of possible meaning might often more faithfully represent the social world it aims to describe. Interpretivism is, by definition, an approach that gives “unapologetic priority to the meaning making of its subjects,” and thus appears “uniquely situated to strengthen the voices and visibility of those who often go unheard and unseen” (Pachirat 2006, 377). The writing that results might grant more legitimacy to the experiences and understandings of the researched.\(^{22}\)

5 The Pitfalls and Costs of Combination

The contributions of interpretation to positivist research are contingent upon the researcher being able to retain an interpretive orientation—a commitment, in other words, to uncovering the meanings assigned to experiences and practices, and an attentiveness to the role of the researcher in developing interpretations. The adoption of this orientation presents a host of challenges. Some challenges beset all interpretive work, and we are hesitant to engage in a full discussion of all the pitfalls and risks within interpretive research. Here, however, we briefly address a few of the most salient concerns for scholars who wish to adopt an interpretive orientation within positivist research.

The Subordination of Interpretivism (and Interpretive Training)

One pitfall lies in the subordination of the epistemological concerns of interpretivism to the aims of positivism. The subordination of interpretivism stands to constrain the most captivating qualities of the interpretive approach—namely, its ability to uncover new lines of inquiry and to unseat accepted wisdoms. This risk is familiar terrain in disciplinary methodological debates, and echoes the critiques of Laitin’s (2003) model of political inquiry, in which ethnography serves as

\(^{22}\) For examples of interpretive research that does exactly this, see, e.g., Katherine Cramer’s elevation of rural perspectives in *The Politics of Resentment* (Cramer 2016), and Samantha Majic’s attention to the political struggles of sex workers in *Sex Work Politics* (Majic 2014).
the “summer intern” to the “senior partners” of formal and statistical analysis (Hopf 2006, 18). Timothy Pachirat raises a similar concern, casting the pluralism of methods as the marginalization and subjugation of interpretation (Pachirat 2017).23

Supporting role combinations harness interpretivism to the aims of positivism, but do not conduct systematic interpretive investigations. These combinations, then, necessarily sacrifice the full potential of interpretivism, in the hope that what we gain in the positivist research might outweigh what we lose from the marginalization of the interpretive approach. Staged and integrative combinations, on the other hand, aim to avoid this subordination. These combinations aspire to treat these approaches as equal and essential partners with complementary roles. Still, the procedural demands of positivist methods, and constraints on time and resources, may inhibit the flexibility and serendipity that characterizes good interpretive work. Staged and integrative combinations then, too, must subordinate some of the aims and nature of interpretive research in exchange for explanatory purchase.

A related risk for our ideal type combinations is that interpretivism may be shortchanged by positivist researchers without sufficient training in the interpretive tradition. Training in interpretive political science typically happens through practice, rather than instruction. There are some textbooks, but these methods tend to be “taught and learned inductively” (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, xiii).24 Even some key interpretive methodology texts are not explicit. Pachirat, for instance, writes Among Wolves as a play with a lively back and forth over key debates, but few definitive statements of what good research is or isn’t. Because the standards of interpretive research are often left implicit, it might take a long time to learn how to meet the

23 For Pachirat’s fictitious positivist spokesperson, “ethnography is immensely useful for generating hypotheses, exploring peculiar residuals that appear in statistical analyses, or helping the researcher uncover potential causal mechanisms linking dependent and independent variables. But, ultimately, to produce what I would consider truly valid scientific knowledge, ethnography must be subsumed within a broader research program in which the other two legs of the stool—statistical and formal analysis—serve to test, and ultimately verify or falsify, the hypotheses and hunches developed by fieldwork” (Pachirat 2017, 16).

24 Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, for instance, write that “[e]thnographic and participant-observer research methods in particular have largely been learned through a kind of apprenticeship, through reading others’ work in a series of courses and a kind of trial-and-error learning by doing (the “drop the graduate student in the field and see if he swims” sort of teaching)” (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, xiv).
evaluative criteria of the interpretive community, and the steps aren’t always clear for positivists trained on statistics textbooks. Because training in the interpretive tradition occurs primarily through emulation and practice, the way out of this challenge is through it. Positivists seeking to learn to incorporate interpretation in their work should begin immediately trying to do so, seeking guidance and criticism to correct novice mistakes.

**Philosophical Contradiction**

The second pitfall of combination involves the ontological and epistemological contradictions. These contradictions arise when the interpretive and positivist components rest on incommensurate assumptions about the nature of causality and the social world (ontology), and about the role of knowledge production within it (epistemology). The risk of philosophical contradiction is perhaps why combinations of interpretive and positivist approaches have been so rarely attempted, and so often discouraged (see, for instance, Schatz 2009, 18, and Ahmed and Sil 2012).

Philosophical contradictions are inherent to staged and integrative combinations, which combine interpretive and positive investigations within one research project. In staged combinations, researchers treat categories identified with an interpretive approach as observable entities. This conflicts with the interpretive premise that social entities do not enjoy a directly and neutrally observable existence independent of how people think of them, and that there are, in fact, no “real” social entities, only culturally mediated social facts (Schaffer 2015, 2). In integrative combinations, interpretive investigations are set alongside positivist investigations. Such an approach requires the scholar (and reader) to hold complex and contradictory views on the nature of causality as they transition between the positivist and interpretive investigation.²⁵

Staged and integrative combinations cannot hope to reconcile these philosophical contradictions. We recommend these combinations, however, as pragmatic strategies for managing these contradictions. These combinations require the clear specification of the aims,

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sequencing, and contribution of each methodological approach, such that it is made clear to the reader which philosophical assumptions should be held or relaxed, and when.

Crucially, this recommendation runs up against the conventional wisdom in disciplinary debates on methodology. In *Interpretive Research Design*, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) write that the accommodation of interpretivist and positivist ontological and epistemological positions poses “tremendous difficulties of logic” within a single question. They continue that, “[i]t is hard, if not impossible, to square research that rests on constructivist ontological presuppositions and interpretive epistemological ones with research that rests on realist ontological and objectivist epistemological ones.”

Schwartz-Shea and Yanow agree, however, that these philosophical inconsistencies disappear when researchers explore a research topic that encompasses several research questions. To some extent, our recommendations are consistent with this position. Integrative combinations do exactly this—these combinations set interpretive investigations alongside positivist investigations (and thereby, encompass distinct interpretive and positivist research questions).

Staged combinations, however, aim to venture further. In one sense, staged combinations do involve separate interpretive and positive investigations, where the interpretive investigation asks, “how did certain categories or classifications come to be?” while the positivist investigation asks, “what are the effects of these categories?” Crucially, though, the answer from the first question makes possible the investigation of the second. This second question relies on knowledge generated within an interpretive framework to answer a positivist question about causes. This requires the scholar (and reader) to bracket the philosophical tensions inherent in this transition from an interpretive to positivist framework. Staged combinations cannot reconcile the consistencies inherent in this move. What they can promise, however, is to enrich and expand the reach of our explanations. At the cost of philosophical consistency, this is a task for which interpretivism and positivism can work side by side.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that harnessing the combined power of interpretive and positive approaches to social science is beneficial for some research investigations. Positive approaches
have specialized in investigations of cause, while interpretive approaches have specialized in investigations of meaning. When scholars find themselves simultaneously investigating both causation and meaning, one obvious option is to access the strengths of positivism and interpretivism. Despite the growing calls for analytic eclecticism, however, combinations of interpretivism and positivism have been widely discouraged. These approaches rest on incommensurate worldviews, we are told, and their combination entails irreconcilable ontological and epistemological contradictions.

By showing how positivists might incorporate elements of interpretivism into their work, we suggest a way to cut through these familiar warnings, thus regaining some of the depth perception that comes with two eyes. We argue, in particular, that an interpretive approach can answer the questions of meaning that arise in positivist research. For scholars who, like ourselves, wish to see the world through radically different lenses, we have introduced a typology of combinations of interpretive and positive approaches. In supporting role combinations, interpretivism is brought to bear on questions of meaning in a limited way, supporting an investigation that is ultimately judged by positivist standards. In staged combinations, interpretivism provides categories and classifications for positivist inquiry. In integrative combinations, researchers set an interpretive investigation alongside the positive investigation. Our recommendations promise benefits—of creativity, demystification, and presentation—but come with the dangers of subordination and contradiction.

One failure of our paper is that it does not itself exemplify many of the best qualities that accompany the combination of interpretive and positive approaches. We have slipped into the dull exposition of a methodology paper, rather than creatively exploring our claims through the vivid performance of them, or through genre-bending approaches (see, for example, Pachirat 2016). This is because we write primarily to positivists who might benefit from learning how to incorporate interpretive approaches in their work, as well as to those who might support, critique, or evaluate such research. Clothing our argument in the familiar garb of a methodology article seems to us the best way to reach our target audience.

We hope that scholars will pick up our ideas about how to combine interpretive and positive approaches and run with them. Along the way, we expect both modest refinements and
radical improvements. We think research practice – trial and error – is the key to progress on interpretive and positive combinations. In this, we follow a long interpretivist tradition of learning by doing. As scholars who are drawn to both approaches feel permission to pursue combinations, they will likely pioneer creative new approaches that we cannot yet imagine, resulting in unforeseen discoveries. We look forward to the adventure.

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