Interpretation for Positivists

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Abstract

Interpretive and positivist methodologies 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 interpretivism. We focus, in particular, on how interpretivism can answer the questions of human meaning-making that arise in the course of positivist research, and we argue that the adoption of interpretivism by positivist researchers can expand the explanatory purchase of our investigations. To develop our arguments, we propose three "ideal type" combinations of interpretivism and positivism. For each ideal type, we delineate the specific contribution of interpretivism; the research problem(s) the ideal type promises to solve; the challenges associated with the ideal type; and the relevant evaluative criteria. We conclude with the stakes of combining of methodologies with distinct political underpinnings, and make the case for combinations that perform a "double move"—i.e., that assume the authority to verify causal relations, but that make visible the role of interpretation in the production of that authority.

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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 nomothetic research (focused on generalization) with the ideographic tradition (focused on the particular) to reach new scientific insights about the social world. However, the two methodologies 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 responding to Katzenstein's invitation: expanded explanatory purchase; more faithful depictions of the social world with richer accounts of human meaning-making; more transparent accounts of the investigative process; and nudges toward creativity in the genre and form of research writing. While we hope our arguments will resonate with both positivists and interpretivists, we primarily address positivists because that is where we feel the benefits of combination are most apparent, and where our authority as methodologists is strongest. We write from experience and need: we articulate what we wish we had read at the beginning of our own attempts to combine interpretations of meaning with positivist investigations of causal effects.

While we take our arguments to be in the spirit of Katzenstein's call, we take seriously the cautions against the combination of positivism and interpretivism. These methodologies are premised on distinct assumptions about *ontology* (the nature of reality) and *epistemology* (whether and how that reality might be known). For interpretivists, the research world does not exist independently of the observer, and is therefore not knowable through external observation. Interpretivists, as a result, focus on interpreting the meanings of actors according to their own (subjective) frames of reference. Positivists, by contrast, view the research world as objectively

real and observable, and tend to focus on the verification of observable causes. These ontologies, then, give rise to different kinds of social science, and the prevailing view in the methodological literature and research practice is that these methodologies should remain separate.

In this article, however, we build a case for interpretation in positivist political science, especially to answer the questions of human meaning-making that arise in the course of positivist research. To make our case, we begin by articulating the tenets and history of interpretivism and positivism. We then offer three "ideal type" combinations of these methodologies: (1) supporting role combinations, (2) staged combinations, and (3) integrative combinations. Supporting role combinations involve the adoption of an interpretivism 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 the combination of interpretivism and positivism might entail, we turn to the stakes of this methodological endeavor. We suspect that the dominant reaction to our paper will concern the stakes of combining ontologies with distinct political underpinnings. Specifically, we anticipate the criticism that we encourage positivists to use interpretivism to reveal, or *demystify*, the inseparability of the researcher and research world, and then to use positivism to *re-mystify* that relation and act "as if" the research world were observable (and, thus, to subvert the revelatory qualities of interpretivism with interpretive tools). To address this reaction, we make the case for combinations that perform a "double move"—i.e., that assume the authority to observe and verify causal relations, but that make visible the contribution of interpretation to the production of that authority. This double move uses interpretivism to expand our explanatory purchase, while recognizing the role of interpretation in that expansion.

Scholars from both traditions will disagree with our sanguine outlook on the combination of interpretivism and positivism. We are writing, however, not for the committed adherents to either paradigm, but for those who understand the assumptions associated with these methodologies 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 combining these methodologies in underrecognized ways.

Before we begin, we should note that we do not propose that all, or even most, researchers should combine positivism and interpretivism. 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 combining these methodologies under certain conditions, and 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 verdict on our intervention will come from practice; whether scholars find resonance with our arguments and combine these methodologies more intentionally and explicitly in their work.

2 Tenets and History

A Tale of Two Traditions

We conceive of interpretivism and positivism as contrasting *methodologies,* a term that refers to a framework of inquiry based on 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 understandings of phenomena of interest. While certain practices and tools are perceived to share an affinity with either interpretivism or positivism,[2] methods are not inherently linked to either methodology.[3]

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[1] Patrick Jackson has suggested that the indeterminacy of the world warrants a "wager" on the most likely ontological position (Jackson 2010, 34). Those who understand either set of ontological assumptions as correct representations of the social world should stick to the positivist or interpretive framework that accompanies their understanding.

[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).

[3] This distinction draws from lectures presented by Timothy Pachirat and Frederic Schaffer at the 2021 Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research. See, also, Gerring (2001), who describes methods as specific rules and procedures (how the social scientist obtains her findings), and methodologies as theoretical frameworks (why those findings are important and true). Also see the distinction drawn by

Our goal in this article is to establish when positivists might benefit from interpretivism. Interpretivism stems from the ontological position that knowledge is intersubjectively created by the researcher and the subject(s) of research. The goal of an interpretivist, then, is not to objectively observe a research world, but to develop interpretations of how that world is perceived by its actors and relay those interpretations to others—i.e., to interpret other people's interpretations of their social world (Geertz 1973, 9).[4] In practice, this involves close attention to the meaning and significance of symbols, choices of words, and assumptions—without prejudging how these meanings will relate to the research later. It also requires reflection on alternative interpretations, and on the role of the researcher—her position, background knowledge, and internal reactions—in shaping her interpretations.

Interpretivism is, of course, a capacious and contested term, but this emphasis on meaning-making is what distinguishes the approach from positivism, which posits an external world against which hypotheses can be tested, and views the accurate representation of this (objectively existing) world as the goal of social 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 positivism of Popper and are subject to vigorous critique (Hawkesworth 2015), but current research practices rarely involve the strict falsification of Popper. Instead, positivists maintain that "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).[5]

Sartori (1970), who wrote that methods texts have little to do with methodology, which concerns the "logical structure and procedure of scientific enquiry."

[4] As Pachirat (2006) succinctly describes the enterprise, interpretivism involves "humans making meaning out of the meaning making of other humans."

[5] 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).

Mixed Method(ologie)s

Decades of vigorous debate about methods and methodologies have resulted in the proliferation of "mixed-methods" research. Scholars now routinely employ multiple methods in the same piece of research, and advice for their combination is increasingly sophisticated (e.g., Humphreys and Jacobs 2015, Seawright 2016). Mixed-methods research is now seen by many as a strategy for overcoming the limitations of single-method research.[6]

Advances in mixed-methods research find parallels in calls for methodological pluralism. Katzenstein and Sil, for instance, 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."

Advocates for the combination of positivism and interpretivism, however, have been rare. 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 interpretivism for tracing causal mechanisms. We aim to extend these works by developing a typology of combinations, introducing the role of evaluative criteria, and considering the wider range of benefits (and challenges) that accompany this task.

Most scholars remain skeptical of this enterprise. Ahmed and Sil argue that combinations of positivism and interpretivism 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

[6] On the risks of this stance, see Ahmed and Sil (2012).

serve to strengthen each other" (Ahmed and Sil 2012, 936). Others are even more direct: Sale et al. (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 positivism and interpretivism. Sale et al. continue that, "the 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 et al. 2002, 50). This recommendation preempts our argument, which is to employ interpretivism and positivism for the questions within an investigation that they are best equipped to answer.

Before we proceed, 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).[7] This may 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.[8] Throughout, we also point to examples of interpretive research in our discipline. Ultimately, however, and as with much else, we must learn by doing.[9] We hope to persuade you to take the risk.

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

[8] For an interpretivist's reflection on how to describe the aims of interpretivism to positivists, see Cramer (2012; 2015). See also Cramer's guidance to researchers trying interpretivism for the first time (2016, 42-44).

[9] Training in interpretivism typically happens through practice, rather than instruction. There are some textbooks, but the associated methods tend to be "taught and learned inductively" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, xiii). 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).

3 How to Combine?

We propose that researchers use 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 phenomenon of interest. The evaluative criteria, in turn, should depend on the role each approach plays in the analysis. Researchers should be prepared to manage the tensions between the procedural demands of positivism and interpretivism, and to identify and navigate the philosophical contradictions for the reader. The rest of this section develops each of these claims.

Causation vs. Meaning

Guided by the assumption that knowledge is co-created by the researcher and researched, interpretivists have tended to focus on investigations of meaning—i.e., on "situated efforts to understand the meaningful character that action has for those whose action it is" (Adcock 2006, 61).[10] Interpretivists can, of course, examine questions of cause, but their investigations tend to focus on this kind of "constitutive" causality—i.e., a 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).[11]

Positivists, by contrast, have specialized in exactly these kinds of mechanistic investigations. Positivists maintain that research should accurately represent an observable research world, and have tended to specialize in the estimation of "effects of causes"—i.e., the observable changes in outcomes that would occur if study units were treated with an

[10] As Adcock explains, the characteristic question in interpretive scholarship is, "What do, or did, these people believe themselves to be doing?" (Adcock 2006, 61).

[11] This is not to say that interpretivists avoid generalizable insights. We might say, however, that interpretivists seek a form of analytic generalization, rather than the empirical generalization pursued by positivists.

intervention.[12] This specialization tends to involve methods (e.g., experiments, regressions, process tracing) that can estimate causal effects or identify causal mechanisms. Positivists, then, are trained in causal analysis—i.e., in the estimation of effects of causes, rather than a "constitutive" causality that explains events in a particular context.

Questions of meaning, however, can and do arise in positivist research. The extent to which positivists face questions of meaning is determined by the nature of scientific evidence about the empirical phenomena of interest. When this evidence appears to be directly observable (How many votes? How much taxation?) and meanings are widely agreed upon (What is a vote? What is taxation?), researchers can proceed within a positivist framework.[13] Questions of meaning, however, come to the fore when answers to questions of meaning are contested, or when phenomena are less directly observable. Such situations arise 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?). It is when questions of meaning arise in positivist research that interpretivism might offer answers.

The Essential Role of Evaluative Criteria

Before we outline how positivists might draw on interpretivism, we should discuss how to evaluate the result. Positivist evaluative criteria will be familiar to scholars trained in the positivist tradition. These criteria are well-codified and 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.[14] Interpretivists have also begun to systematize

[12] Although see Goertz and Mahoney (2012), who observe that a core goal of some positivist qualitative research involves the explanation of outcomes in individual cases (i.e., a "causes of effects" causality). Yamamoto (2012) makes a similar point for statistical studies.

[13] An interpretivist might respond that even 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.

[14] For an extended discussion of positivist evaluative criteria, see Gerring (2012, 15, 80-103).

their own standards in response to the allegation that there are no criteria for judging interpretive research—the "anything goes" charge (Schwartz-Shea, 2006, 91). The most frequently invoked criteria are those proposed by Schwartz-Shea (2006), which include expectations of "thick description," "trustworthiness," reflexivity, and triangulation.[15] While the necessity of established criteria is contested, interpretivists 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).[16]

Interpretive evaluative criteria, then, afford interpretive research explicit recognition as interpretive work. However, these criteria complicate the task of combination, because a scholar who brings positivism and interpretivism to their work must engage two distinct understandings of "good" research. For positivists, then, the decision to combine methodologies may depend on a cost-benefit analysis: is the payoff from interpretivism worth the challenge of convincing two audiences that the research is valuable? We address this challenge in two ways. First, we aim to increase the value of combination by outlining when and how positivists might use interpretation. Second, we hope to decrease the challenge of engaging two communities with guidance for evaluating the research that results.

A Spectrum of Investigations

In what follows, we visualize a spectrum that ranges from investigations of cause to investigations of meaning. Each pole represents the standard approach to research within

[15] 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 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).

[16] 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).

interpretivism or positivism, and we suspect that most research can (and should) remain within either epistemic community. Between these poles, however, we identify three "ideal type" combinations of positivism and interpretivism: supporting role combinations, staged combinations, and integrative combinations. The three combinations fall into two categories: supporting role combinations consist in the adoption of interpretation for subcomponents of positivist research, while staged and integrative combinations involve, in different ways, the inclusion of satisfying interpretive and positivist investigations within a single study.

These combinations offer an expansion in explanatory purchase, but come with challenges—most notably, perhaps, the challenge of philosophical contradiction, and the constraints that positivism places on interpretive research. For each combination, we delineate the specific contribution of interpretivism; the research problem(s) the ideal type promises to solve; the challenges that accompany the ideal type; and the evaluative criteria that should be applied to research of this kind.

Supporting Role Combinations

At its core, interpretivism involves making sense of how actors perceive their social worlds. Supporting role combinations incorporate this interpretive emphasis on meaning-making 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 research—noticing (and recording) the moments and details that catch one's attention, investigating the meanings embedded in these observations, and reflecting on how they might inform the questions and conclusions of the research.[17] By highlighting these details and their significance, and by being attuned to what has significance "in the field," an interpretive orientation can help

[17] The details to which the researcher might attend are wide-ranging. For an exemplary interpretive analysis of rhetoric and symbols, see Wedeen's *Ambiguities 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.

us to uncover new variation and lines of inquiry for positivist examination (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).

Take, for instance, the radicalization of Muslim clerics, investigated by Nielsen (2017). Counterterrorism experts and scholars frequently interpret jihadism through the lens of political violence and terrorism (which, typically, is the meaning jihadist violence has for its victims). Nielsen, however, argues that jihadists give very different meanings to their actions. 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 scholars in other fields. These leaders produce syllabi (one of which Nielsen translates and reproduces as part of his analysis), and they refer to associated dissidents as their "students."

This interpretive insight—that jihadists clerics interpret and evaluate their careers through a scholarly lens—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 (the surprisingly mundane academic career pressures that can push clerics toward militant jihadism), and Nielsen (2017) proceeds to examine these claims with regression analysis and case studies in a positivist framework. In this form of combination, then, 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.

Interpretivism, however, can also inform elements of research design in positivist research. By unpacking the meanings and uses of concepts in contexts of interest, an interpretive orientation can serve as a bridge between abstract concepts and empirical realities. In this second form of supporting role combination, interpretivism informs the processes of classification, measurement, and operationalization that enable positivist inquiry.

Take, by way of illustration, Thachil's (2018) investigation 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 the local term, "*chowk*," to refer to labor spot markets, and describing situations that have significant meaning to the laborers taking the survey). This attunement to meaning and language improves the construct and ecological validity of the experimental vignette. In this type of supporting role combination, then, interpretation can guide classification, operationalization, and measurement—elements that are constitutive of positivist inquiry.

A third supporting role combination involves the incorporation of interpretation into positivist analyses. Consider, for example, the interpretation of statistical topic models (Blei, Ng, and Jordan 2003; Roberts et al. 2016) and open-ended survey responses (Roberts et al 2014). Often, these exercises aim to understand the meanings that are conveyed through text and speech. Although this research tends to be formulated in a positivist framework, these exercises are fundamentally interpretive tasks. By situating these tasks within positivism, 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 would 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 reactions and interpretations of the researcher.

As should be clear from our examples, we believe that supporting role combinations can lead to more creative positivist research—whether through the discovery of puzzling patterns of variation, the development of theoretical insights, the design of measurements and instruments, or enhanced sensitivity to the interpretive tasks in positivist analyses. This argument, importantly, is not that interpretivism is inherently more creative than positivism, but that creativity often occurs when disparate ideas are brought together by one mind. Positivists approach research with an attunement to empirical variation and causal patterns. When combined with an interpretive orientation, this specialization may unlock new and creative lines

of inquiry. These combinations, then, are valuable *because* they entail the meeting of a specialization in causes with a specialization in meanings. We suspect that this "meeting" may generate lines of inquiry that reading interpretive research alone could not. Creative benefits accrue from the *practice* of interpretivism by positivists, not just from its consumption.

It should also be clear from our examples that there exists research in political science that resembles our description of supporting role combinations.[18] Where supporting role combinations differ from this research, however, is that they *also* include an explicit description of the role of interpretation. Instead of obscuring or exorcising the role of interpretation in the research, the researcher would instead describe its contribution—by reporting the moment of interpretive insight that sparked the theory, for instance, or the extent to which conclusions drawn from data depend on their background knowledge and experiences. The value of these explicit descriptions is that they can shed light on the process by which researchers arrive at understandings—an underexamined (and undertaught) component of the research process.[19]

The final point to draw from our examples is that supporting role combinations do not involve the systematic investigations of meaning that characterize 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

[18] Alongside our examples, supporting role combinations bear similarities to some positivist research that is conducted with an "ethnographic sensibility." To adopt an ethnographic sensibility is to be interested in how actors perceive and make sense of their contexts and experiences. For an explication of the term as we use it, see Pader (2006, 161-176). For examples of positivist research that uses an ethnographic sensibility, and that we think resemble supporting role combinations, see Pearlman (2013, 2016), Bishara (2015), and Krause (2018).

[19] This advice aligns with calls in sociology for more accurate reporting of "revelatory moments" during fieldwork. Trigger et al. (2012, 516-525) define these moments as unplanned and "intense subjective experiences" that generate theoretical insight, and argue that descriptions of these experiences can demystify the process by which researchers arrive at their understandings. Nielsen (2017, 67) provides one example of how this might be done by printing a photograph of one such revelatory moment in the field. This moment impressed the significance that students of Islamic law place on asking questions after lectures to make connections with prominent clerics. Lee Ann Fujii (2015) also provides several examples of this kind of description to support her case for "accidental ethnography"—the unplanned moments during research (like overheard stories, or observations of everyday scenes) that deepen the researcher's understanding of the research context, and lead to discoveries that determine the course of the project.

tradition. Thachil (2018) does not explore how the practice of rate-*katna* came to be salient, nor does he consider how *chowks* are situated within local power relationships.[20]

Supporting role combinations, then, necessarily sacrifice the full potential of interpretivism for explanatory purchase in positivist research. In supporting role combinations, interpretivism contributes knowledge for research in a positivist framework. Researchers adopt an interpretive orientation when interpretivism can contribute to positivist research—whether in the early stages (how do I explain this phenomenon?), design (how do I operationalize this concept?), or analysis of research (how do I draw conclusions from these data?). The researcher is attuned to details (e.g., language, symbols, local knowledge) and to their implications for that stage of the research. Throughout, the researcher is intentional about the use of interpretation, and explicit in her description of its contributions.

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

This is not to say, however, that the use of interpretation is 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 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 reflects our understanding of the philosophical assumptions of supporting role combinations. These combinations operate within a positivist ontology, which posits an external and observable research world against which hypotheses can be tested, and

[20] 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 methodologies.

which views research as the pursuit of "truth" in this external research world. Interpretivism contributes to particular tasks within the positivist investigation, but does not unseat the positivist ontology that undergirds the research. We will return to the possibility of philosophical 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.

Interpretivism is well-suited to the task of identifying salient categories and their consequences in particular contexts. As Lisa Wedeen explains, "[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: 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.[21] Staged combinations, then, aim to avoid the subordination of interpretivism, and aspire to treat the interpretive and positivist components as equal and essential partners with complementary roles.

When might a staged combination be useful for positivist researchers? We recommend this combination 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.[22] Staged combinations bring our interpretive faculties to bear on this problem of observation, such that we might uncover theoretically relevant explanatory categories, 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 commit to an interpretive investigation at the outset of the research. The researcher conducts this interpretive investigation until she decides to trade in her interpretive hat for a positivist orientation. At this point, the researcher treats 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 generalizable causal explanations favored in positivist research.

This transition from an interpretive to positivist framework presents a practical challenge: namely, how to deal with the tension between the stepwise procedural demands of positivist research (guided by the steps of the scientific method), and the procedural demands of interpretivism. As Dvora Yanow explains, interpretivism has an "improvisational" quality: the

[21] 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."

[22] Recall, for instance, our earlier examples of norms and emotive rhetoric.

interpretivist "cannot adhere 'rigidly' to a research protocol," because she does not know ahead of time what meaning(s) will be found (Yanow 2006, 70-71).

Staged combinations ask the researcher to remain flexible and adaptive in the interpretive investigation of categories, before transitioning to the stepwise demands of positivist research. There is no easy guidance for the timing of this transition: for some, this transition will result in premature judgments; for others, the investment in the interpretive investigation will shortchange the completeness of the second. It is up to the researcher to justify when (and for how long) to let the data guide the research, and when to accept their interpretive categories as serviceable explanatory variables.

This transition from interpretivism to positivism also raises the question of philosophical contradiction, and it is at this point that we should resume the discussion from the previous section. In staged combinations, an interpretive investigation provides categories for a positivist investigation that treats these categories as real and observable entities. This, of course, conflicts with the interpretive position 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). According to this position, an interpretive investigation cannot reveal directly observable entities that are external to the researcher. This renders inconsistent the use of categories from the interpretive component in the positivist investigation, which treats the research world as observable, and research as capable of revealing objectively existing causal patterns.

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 contradictions by specifying the assumptions that undergird each stage of research.[23] The researcher should explicitly identify (and bracket) the contradictions involved in the transition between interpretivism and positivism, such that it is made clear to the reader which assumptions should be held or relaxed, and when.

[23] 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.

This recommendation, importantly, runs up against the conventional wisdom in disciplinary debates on methodology. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), for instance, write that the accommodation of interpretivist and positivist assumptions poses "tremendous difficulties of logic" within a single question. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow agree, however, that these inconsistencies disappear when researchers explore a topic with several research questions. To some extent, staged combinations fit this description: 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, however, the answer from the first question makes possible the investigation of the second. This second question uses knowledge from an interpretive investigation for a positivist investigation. This requires the researcher to identify, articulate, and bracket the tensions involved in the transition from interpretivism to positivism.

Philosophical contradictions aside, how should staged combinations be judged? We recommend two metrics of evaluation. First, we propose that the interpretive investigation of categories be evaluated as standalone interpretive research. Second, we propose that the positivist investigation 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.[24] Our aim, rather, is to suggest that the interpretive components in this combination deserve recognition as interpretive research. We have referred to Schwartz-Shea's evaluative criteria as frequently invoked interpretive standards, but note that these criteria remain contested, and that the evaluation of the interpretive components depends, ultimately, on the "attractiveness and persuasiveness of what they contribute" (Pachirat 2014, 377).

Integrative Combinations

In our third and final type of combination, researchers conduct an interpretive investigation of meaning alongside a positivist investigation of causation. Where staged combinations involve the

[24] 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, mono-cropped rows—might very well prove fatal to what it is that makes interpretive approaches so fertile to begin with" (Pachirat 2014, 377).

sequential arrangement of interpretivism and positivism, 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 reveal 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.

This combination, then, aims to avoid the "tunnel vision" that positivism might encourage in the investigation of X and Y. Throughout the research, the researcher remains attentive to meaning-making, open to messiness and ambiguity, and engaged in reflexive consideration of their own position and reactions. Although the procedural demands of positivism will necessarily constrain these commitments, the researcher retains a commitment to interpretivism throughout the research, and to the investigation of the questions that are generated by this commitment. Like staged combinations, integrative combinations aim to treat the interpretive and positivist components as equal and essential partners.

Also like staged combinations, integrative combinations cannot resolve the contradictions inherent in the use of positivism and interpretivism 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 assumptions that undergird each line of inquiry, and the intentional bracketing of alternative assumptions as the researcher transitions between the interpretive and positivist investigation throughout the research.

That the interpretive and positivist components are interwoven merits a return to our discussion of procedural demands. In supporting role combinations, the researcher remains in a positivist framework until they encounter or anticipate a question of meaning that might benefit

from interpretation. In staged combinations, the researcher conducts an interpretive investigation of categories until she decides that this investigation has produced serviceable variables for positivist analysis. In both cases, the sequencing of interpretivism and positivism is relatively straightforward: the interpretive component concludes when the researcher decides that it has produced sufficient knowledge for the positivist investigation.

In integrative combinations, however, the interpretive component does not exist to produce knowledge for a positivist investigation, but to enrich our overall understanding of a particular phenomenon. There is, therefore, no obvious conclusion point for the interpretive investigation. The researcher might decide to conduct both investigations in parallel, or to pursue a particular form to sequencing based on the nature or constraints of her investigation. In either case, the researcher should justify her decision, and remain attentive to the tradeoffs that arise from tensions between the stepwise demands of positivism, and the "improvisational" demands of interpretivism.

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 our arguments, this section offers three ideal type approaches to the adoption of interpretivism within positivist research. These ideal types 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 1

Ideal Type	Role of Interpretation	Problems Solved by Interpretation	Evaluative Criteria	Philosophical Contradiction
Supporting Role	Interpretation assists with tasks in positivist research.	Interpretation solves problems within positivist tasks.	Positivist criteria.	No. Interpretation does not unseat positivist assumptions.
Staged	Interpretation generates categories for positivist investigation.	Interpretation solves the problem of unobservable explanatory variables.	Interpretive criteria (investigation of categories) and positivist criteria (investigation of implications).	Yes. Interpretive assumptions for the interpretive investigation; positivist assumptions for the positivist investigation.
Integrative	The interpretive investigation accompanies the positivist research.	Interpretation solves the problem of positivist "tunnel vision."	Interpretive criteria (interpretive investigation) and positivist criteria (positivist investigation).	Yes. Interpretive assumptions for the interpretive investigation; positivist assumptions for the positivist investigation.

4 The Stakes of Combination

Up to this point, we have described how the ontologies of interpretivism and positivism produce different kinds of research, and how their emphases on meanings and causes might be productively combined within a research project. We have argued that these combinations can expand the explanatory purchase of our investigations when questions of meaning arise in

positivist research, and that these explanatory benefits can occur at all stages of research—whether through the discovery of new and puzzling variation, through the design of creative operationalizations and measurements, or through enhanced sensitivity to the information conveyed by text and speech.

We have also identified the risks that accompany this endeavor. First, these combinations involve philosophical contradictions because interpretivism and positivism rest on incommensurate assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), and the role of knowledge production within it (epistemology). We offered our ideal types as strategies for managing these contradictions (e.g., via the specification of the aims, sequencing, and contribution of each methodology), although we recognize that this task requires skillful navigation and a readership willing to go along. Second, we highlighted the constraints that the stepwise procedural demands of positivism place on the flexibility of interpretivism. On this point, we left it up to the researcher to decide and justify the timing of the transition(s) between the interpretive and positivist components.

Our arguments, then, have focused on *how* we might incorporate an investigation of meanings into an investigation of causes, and on *why* we might (or might not) want to do so. What we have not addressed, however, are the implications of combining ontologies with distinct political underpinnings. What is at stake in this endeavor?

To answer this question, we need to surface the *political* tensions between the ontologies that guide interpretivism and positivism. A positivist ontology views the research world as objectively real and knowable though external observation. In an interpretive ontology, by contrast, the researcher cannot separate herself from the research world, and knowledge must therefore be co-created by the researcher and the subjects of research. From an interpretive perspective, then, the idea that a researcher can stand "outside" the research world (and objectively describe and predict that world) is, from the outset, a form of misrepresentation or *mystification*. Positivism, on this reading, involves acting "as if" the world were objectively observable, and then failing to acknowledge this act of mystification (and thus, concealing the nature of the misrepresentation). Thus, if only by example, we can understand interpretive research as a project of *demystification* against positivism—by foregrounding how the researcher

and research world intersubjectively create knowledge, interpretivism renders visible the misrepresentation that underpins positivist research.

One reading of our argument, then, is that we encourage positivists to *demystify* certain components of their research (by describing the interpretive insight that sparked a theory, for instance, or conducting an interpretive investigation of explanatory categories), before *re-mystifying* those components for positivist examination—by proceeding to test that theory against an external world, for instance, or by treating those explanatory categories as real and observable variables. According to this reading, we put demystification in the service of more mystification, and subvert the interpretive project of demystification with interpretivists' own tools.

An alternative reading, however, and the one we intend, is that our recommendations aim for research that is self-aware and explicit about the mystification that occurs in positivist research. This research puts investigations of meaning in the service of positivist explanatory purchase, but also seeks to make visible the role of the researcher (i.e., her position and interpretations) in the development of those explanations. This research does not discard the authority to conduct causal investigations, but neither does it conceal the means of its production.

Indeed, what we have in mind are combinations of interpretivism and positivism that perform a kind of "double move"—i.e., that assume the authority to observe and verify causal relations in the positivist investigation, while using the interpretive investigation to foreground the production of that authority. Supporting role combinations ask researchers to assume the authority to conduct an investigation of causes, but require descriptions of the role of researcher interpretation in the development of theories, research designs, and inferences from data. Staged combinations ask researchers to describe the interpretive development of categories before they claim the authority to observe and verify their causal effects. Integrative investigations, finally, ask researchers to conduct investigations of causes (Does X cause Y?), while foregrounding the intersubjective nature of their arguments (e.g., Where did the meaning of X come from? How do my background and position inform that interpretation?). [25]

[25] We borrow the term "double move" from the feminist scholar Donna Haraway's conception of writing (what she calls, "cyborg writing"). This writing resists "the kind of masterful "I," a particular kind of authority position that makes the viewer forget the apparatus of the production of that authority," and

This "double move," then, does not put interpretive demystification in the service of positivist mystification. Rather, we aim to expand the explanatory purchase of our positivist research, while also acknowledging the mystification required to assume authority over the investigation of causal relations. This, we think, is a task for which interpretivism and positivism can work side by side.

5 Conclusion

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

By showing how positivists might incorporate interpretivism into their work, we suggest a way to cut through these warnings, and to regain some of the depth perception that comes with two eyes. We argue, in particular, that interpretivism 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 interpretivism and positivism. 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. These combinations promise an expansion in explanatory purchase, but come with the challenges of philosophical contradiction and the constraints that the procedural demands of positivism place on interpretive research.

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foregrounds "the apparatus of the production of its own authority, even while it's doing it" (Olsen 1996, 5; Haraway 1985).

We have also addressed what we suspect may be the dominant reaction to our paper: namely, the stakes of combining ontologies with distinct political underpinnings, and in particular, the implications of incorporating interpretivism into a positivist ontology that, from an interpretive perspective, begins with a form of mystification. Rather than using interpretivism in the service of positivist ends (or, as an interpretivist might put it, to enable more mystification), we have argued for combinations of interpretivism and positivism that engage in a kind of "double move"—i.e., that claim authority over causal relations, while making visible the production of that authority.

One failure of our paper is that it does not itself exemplify many of the qualities that might accompany the combination of interpretivism and positivism. 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 formats.[26] This is because we write primarily to positivists who might benefit from learning how to incorporate interpretivism 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 interpretivism and positivism 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 methodologies 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.

[26] Pachirat (2017), for instance, structures his methodology textbook as a stage-play script.

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