Qualitative Transparency Deliberations

hosted by the Social Science Research Institute at Duke University on behalf of the APSA Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research
https://www.qualtd.net/

An Example of a Qualitative Method: Empathic Interpretation

https://www.qualtd.net/viewtopic.php?f=21&t=193

An Example of a Qualitative Method: Empathic Interpretation

Posted: **Mon Dec 05, 2016 4:59 pm**
by **Bill Kelleher**
One way to help promote more mutual understanding between Quantitative and Qualitative political scientists is to consider why the polls leading up to the Trump election failed to detect the number of potential voters who intended to vote for him. Retrospectively one can excuse the error by saying that not enough white voters without any college education were included, or that late deciders changed the expected outcome. [1] But these excuses fail to address the larger problem.

That there were millions of people who intended to vote, or were *disposed towards* voting, for Trump, particularly in the states he won, is a reality. The predisposition was there, yet the methods pollsters used to detect that reality failed to do so successfully. Meanings, feelings, intentions, and other states of mind are a reality.

When methods that are meant to detect a particular reality fail to do so, then something may be wrong with those methods. Suppose a clock, or a thermometer, or a calculation for the trajectory of a space craft are just a little off. Does the word “almost” justify their continued use as is? Hardly. They require correction.

The use of quantitative methods ought to continue in political science, of course. But a qualitative supplement is needed to add a deeper sensitivity to the methods of the profession. The following, then, is one example of a qualitative method applied to an instance of political behavior in the 2016 election; namely, why 53% of white women voters voted for Trump.

The method used here is not as replicable as would be an experiment in a chemistry or physics laboratory. Nevertheless, it is a method for detecting an existing reality. Its empathic observations can be criticized and corrected, rejected, or confirmed by peers in the field. Ideally, this method of empathic understanding is neither a form of psychological projection, nor of mystical clairvoyance. Indeed, one of the challenges of qualitative peer review is to keep the application of the method free from such potential pollutants. This example, first posted at *The New West* [2], is offered to provide quantitativists with an illustration of a qualitativist method, and as a focal point for further discussion.

Empathy as a Method for Understanding Why 53% of White Women Voted for Trump

Several recent news articles, including one from The New York Times and The Atlantic offer up an

explanation for why 53% of white women voters voted for Donald Trump, despite the disrespect he has shown for women, particularly white women. For example, the New York Times article presents political scientist Kathleen Dolan's explanation of this political behavior. That explanation can be stated in the form of this syllogism:

Empirical studies show that
A) voters generally tend to vote according to their party identification, and that
B) a majority of white women identify with the Republican Party;
C) therefore, a majority of white women voted for Trump rather than Clinton.

This "explanation" has the virtue of being relatively straight forward insofar as it consists of explicit inferences drawn from accepted facts. But I'm not satisfied with the explanation given. For me, the implication that party ID caused the voting results seems overly mechanistic, shallow, and insufficient. I still want to know why so many white women voters voted for Donald Trump.

I suggest that to answer that question requires an exercise of empathy to go beyond the mere drawing of inference C) from the facts of A) and B).

Empathically, I understand the American voter to have a meaning of "politics" in mind that guides the voter's choice. In general, to the American voter "politics" means the competition of two political parties for governmental power and office. Thus, to participate in "politics" is to position oneself in relation to one party or the other. (Sometimes voters cherry pick from the offerings of the two major parties; sometimes they deny identifying with either party, and call themselves "independent" of either party. Rarely, of course, voters identify with some third party. In any case, they seem to understand themselves as acting in relation to one of the two major parties.)

I also understand empathically that for the white female voters under consideration in this example, "politics" is assumed to be a realm of behavior outside and distinct from the "social" realm, in which gender identities are understood to exist. Because the two realms are assumed to be distinct, the rules for participating in each are also distinct. Thus, while party ID is generally not a primary reason for liking one person over another in the social realm, it often is a primary reason for voting for one person over another in the political realm.

Professor Dolan finds that in the social world, "sex really matters." Dolan refers to her studies on attitudes "about male and female candidates in general, and found that [respondents] held gender stereotypes about their strengths and weaknesses, like women excelling at health policy and men at crime policy" (see this study). Yet the voting of those respondents was not guided by their stereotype beliefs, but tended to follow party ID. Why is that?

While Dolan does not reach this conclusion, to me her findings lend support to my empathy-based suggestion that the voters in question have this mental separation of the political and the social, with each realm having its own set of rules for behavior. While this configuration of meanings is probably not the result of an informed political theory, it does seem to me to be what enabled white women voters to vote their party ID, even though they fully recognized Trump's behavior violated the social norms requiring respect for women.

This explanation, which goes deeper than party ID-as-cause, cannot be arrived at by gathering statistics, but only by empathizing with the mental reasoning, some of which may be unconscious, of these American white women voters. I see empathy as a way of getting to the meanings these voters have acted on although they may not have thought through their intellectual positions. Hence, the meanings I mention are more in the nature of pre-theoretical, and of pre-intellectual awareness.

William J. Kelleher, Ph.D.
Dr. Kelleher earned his Ph.D. in Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1984. He is the author of several books, including The Human Birth Defect, which uses empathy to explain human pre-history.
Blogger at Internet Voting for All
Political science papers at Academia.edu
Email: wjkellpro@aol.com

Footnotes
[1] For instance see, The Polls Missed Trump. We Asked Pollsters Why.
By Carl Bialik and Harry Enten, November 9, 2016,
http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the ... sters-why/ ; and,
Pollsters Probably Didn't Talk To Enough White Voters Without College Degrees
By Nate Silver, December 1, 2016,
http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/pol ... e-degrees/

[2] This example was first posted on the Western Political Science blog, The New West, on December 1, 2016 as,
Empathy as a Method for Understanding Why 53% of White Women Voted for Trump
https://thewpsa.wordpress.com/2016/12/0 ... for-trump/ See this post for the many links provided therein.

Powered by phpBB® Forum Software © phpBB Limited
https://www.phpbb.com/