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Community Transparency Statement for Interpretive Political Science

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by **Bill Kelleher**
All political scientists who attempt to explain political behavior exercise empathy. Empathy is a form of interpretation. Its practice involves assuming a human-to-human relation between the interpreter and his or her subject. This is not an "objective" relationship in the sense that a physicist or chemist would have in relation to particles in motion, or the constituent elements of a liquid or other form of material. Those are inanimate objects, not living persons.

To explain political behavior requires an entering into the mentation of the actors under study. This entering into, what Michael Polanyi calls "in-dwelling," is a completely personal act. For example, in a recent post here [1], I entered into the mentation of those women voters who voted for Donald Trump. I asked what mentation is required for women who have been demeaned as a gender to nevertheless vote their support for the man who disrespected their kind. As a human who has studied various forms of mentation, particularly in the literature of social and political science, as well as in myself, I fashioned my hypothesis as to what kind of mental conditions are required to answer my question and to thus explain their behavior.

Clearly, this method is too personal and unique to ever be replicated. Furthermore, the practice of empathy as a method relies upon knowledge and skills that I might not be aware of as I practice it. Honestly, I don't know how I arrive at the conclusions I hypothesize. I rely very much on what Polanyi calls "tacit knowledge." Thus, my findings may be suspected of being mere psychological projections, or a claim to some kind of extrasensory clairvoyance. Yet, I contend that *every effort* made in our profession to explain political behavior rests primarily on the practice of empathy.

Statistics about voting behavior are mere numbers until an empathic interpreter gives them some meaning. For instance, suppose it is accurate to say that 53% of white women voters voted for Trump. This fact of political behavior means nothing until some empathic interpretation is offered to explain it. To say that a majority of white women voters identify as Republicans, therefore a majority of white women voters voted for Trump, does not explain the behavior, but merely recites more numbers.

To say that party identity *causes* voting behavior, does not answer but begs the question. To understand the concept "party identity" requires empathy. Because I know in myself what I experience when I "identify"

with some group or political party, I can both understand the concept of "party identity" and use it to explain voting behavior. But my explanation will only make sense to other folks who understand within themselves what it means to "identify."

Furthermore, I cannot fully explain why or even how I identify with some group when I do. All I know is that I just do! There are tacit processes in operation in my act of identification as "political scientist," "Democratic Socialist," "male," "Irishman," "Californian," etc. of which I'm not fully aware. My experience is that I just do it.

How can a standard of "transparency" be applied to the practice of empathic interpretation in political science? How can I make transparent what operates within me tacitly? My exercise of my knowledge and skills cannot be made transparent, not in any sense that would make them replicable for the next guy. The standard is unrealistic, inapplicable, and irrelevant to any form of interpretive political science. And, all political science which attempts to explain political behavior necessarily exercises the personal skill of empathy.

The concept of "transparency," as it applies to scientific method, assumes the laboratory conditions of an idealized natural science, like physics or chemistry. In these sciences transparency of method is required so that the method can be replicated. Presumably, the replication of an experiment can be done so as to verify the hypothesis produced by the prior experiment.

Whether or not this is actually what happens in the natural sciences, the ideal is nonsense for political science. Because political scientists are not machines, but unique persons each exercising his or her own personal skills and knowledge, the ideal of replication is ridiculous. First, the unique, by definition, cannot be replicated. Second, in reality political behavior is never repeated, but is always an unfolding of unique circumstances flowing through time.

The problem for our profession is not to replicate the method and conditions of empathic interpretations, but to exercise critical judgment of the interpretations that are offered in the field. Peer review can produce reasons to reject, modify, or validate empathic interpretations. Knowledge can be cumulative. Perhaps general principles can be inferred from what is known. But we are dogs chasing our tails as long as we try to fulfill standards drawn from other fields of science, instead of developing our own standards based on our own self-knowledge of who we are and what we do.

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[1] An Example of a Qualitative Method: Empathic Interpretation
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