

INTERPRETIVE POLICY ANALYSIS CONFERENCE 2021

Panel Title:

P30 - Interpretive Policy Analysis: Bringing Social Meaning Back in

Panel Convenors:

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Now that interpretive policy analysis is no longer a newcomer, it's a good time to assess its significance both for present circumstances and future practices. This involves a look at where we have come from and where we want to go. The purpose of this workshop is to initiate such an assessment by attempting to formulate pertinent questions as much as by seeking final answers.

Interpretive policy analysis emerged from disillusionment with the positivist and technocratic character of conventional policy analysis, as it had developed during the post-war period and had become dominant by the decade of the 1970s. This disillusionment was part of a larger disillusionment with positivism signaled by a methodological 'restructuring' in social and political theory, which was prominently advanced late in the decade. Emergent tendencies converged in the 1980s with the explicit advent of interpretive social science, which provided the basis later for the development of interpretive policy analysis, especially as proposed by Dvora Yanow.

The point of interpretive method is to 'bring meaning back in'. That allows no recourse for positivism's insistence that direct apprehensions of 'brute data' provide the building blocks for the straightforward identification and measurement of variables in the explanation of causal relationships. That is because an interpretive view posits the understanding of meaning as necessary for access to the subject matter. Being 'in on' the meanings of a particular context is, in other words, indispensable for the very conduct of inquiry. It is not a question of whether or not to engage in interpretation. The question is how explicitly and how well the necessary task of interpretation is done. Positivism tends to impoverish itself by failing to acknowledge – and thereby marginalizing – the inescapable interpretive aspects of its own inquiries.

Interpretive method seeks an understanding of the meanings inscribed in cultural formations – including language itself – and as they become manifest in interpersonal connections, indirect as well as direct, constituting social and communal relationships. Accordingly, interpretive policy analysis focuses on the way human communication involves the meaning of symbols, artifacts, discourses, actions, deliberations, narratives and frames.

With its quest to bring meaning back in, interpretive method is relevant to the full range of the social sciences, as well as the humanities. The method is explicitly acknowledged as central to critical policy studies. But we still need to consider how the approach can move more to the center of policy studies

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generally. We also need to examine internal issues, particularly questions related to social meaning raised by critical and deconstructive approaches. We welcome papers exploring these questions, including those relating to the contingency and instability of meaning and context. A diversity of approaches to meaning can provide a point of departure for the formulation of questions relevant to a reconsideration of interpretive policy analysis.