

# Interpretation in the Study of Australian Politics and Policy<sup>1</sup>

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Amid the clamour of recent calls for evidence-based policymaking, citizen-centred governance, open government, and any number of other international trends in the business of public administration, another, less-heralded one has quietly taken root in Australia: a call to put interpretation at the centre of our analysis. As the self-made image of the objective civil servant slowly erodes in Australia, as elsewhere, there is growing acknowledgment that what the evidence says, how citizens should be involved, what open government means and entails, or indeed the significance and implications of any other trend in public administration, must be subject to interpretation of the actors involved. This is not to advance the notion of a new post-modern orthodoxy in thinking about Australian politics and policy—as fairly obviously no such orthodoxy exists—but rather to point out that an interest in subjective meaning is no longer the domain of the academic fringe. To mainstream policy and public administration scholars and practitioners alike, then, increasingly interpretation matters. That is not to say it didn't matter before – our contribution to this collection aims to show that to some extent it always has – but that the advent of 'interpretivism' (the inevitable 'ism' that emerged to attach itself to a particular interest of scholars in interpretation in politics and policymaking) has brought sharper focus to its significance, both in theory and practice.

## An interpretive core?

As with every 'ism', however, once established as a legitimate alternative to mainstream understanding, the term has acquired new followers and wider usage. In doing so its meanings have proliferated and diverged – this is a key insight that interpretivism brings to the table and so it should not come surprise that academia is no different to public administration – and discussion ensues about what the core features of this move are; whose work justifies the label and why? The purpose of this collection is to open up debate about this question with a particular focus on Australia. The Australian experience is significant to this global movement for two reasons. Firstly, several key figures, including two of the contributors to this symposium, worked from Australia as the movement gained momentum, and a developing stable of early career researchers in

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Australia are emerging from their shadow. And secondly, because the Australian study of politics and administration has not approximated the positivist paradigm (the label interpretivists tend to apply to those interested in objectivity) in the way other countries and regions have, the Antipodean experience is an interesting vantage point to ask questions about what the core of this move is.

If interpretation mattering in Australian politics and policymaking is a given, what this symposium adds is a series of reflections on how it matters and analyses of what it means for the conduct and study of public administration. The articles comprise a broad sweep—some historically-oriented on the roots of interpretivism, and others forward-looking to a research agenda for this enterprise; some focused on specific cases or techniques of interpretation, and others on more general themes; some situated firmly in Australia, and others drawing lessons from abroad—but what unites them is a common set of questions. How can we understand the role of interpretation in the practice and study of public administration in Australia and beyond? Why and how does it matter? What is the best way forward for scholars of interpretation? The answers provided are overlapping, varied, even contradictory—indicative of a lack of settlement that emerges in this symposium over how best to approach, study and represent interpretation in politics and policy scholarship in Australia.

If this symposium represents a spectrum of views on how interpretation matters for the ways we think about policy, politics and administration, then the inevitable conclusion is that the movement is not as tightly defined around a core doctrine as is often assumed. Rather, it is a label that scholars use to denote, project and identify with a series of loosely held meanings and beliefs about what research is all about and how it should be undertaken (Bevir and Rhodes might call it a ‘tradition’). This point is perhaps best drawn out by the eclectic affinities between the apparently sceptical challenge of Marsh, Hall and Fawcett, supposedly lobbed in from outside the interpretive bubble, and some of the other contributions from avowed, self-labelling interpretivists. To be sure, Marsh et al. by and large stand at one pole, and Rhodes (against whom their argument is constituted) by and large at the other, but the other contributions sit across this continuum, sharing aspects of each of these contrasting accounts, taking a mid-way position or adopting a slightly different take on key issues of contention.

Here we isolate three particular fissures that loom in the interpretive account, all of which speak to ongoing unrest about the relationship between interpretation and ‘the real world’, to borrow and bastardise from Marsh’s critical realist perspective. One is interpretation and power, on whether ‘structures’ sit within the realm of interpretation or constrain it from outside; another is interpretation and the truth, on the how the meanings actors ascribe to political issues relate to objectivity and causal explanation; and the last is interpretation and the *other*, on the place of interpretation in the broader study of politics and policymaking in Australia. In this brief introduction to the symposium, we

begin to sketch out these fissures in the hope of orienting the papers that follow and revealing more clearly what is at stake in the similarities and disagreements among them.

## Interpretation and power

By popular reputation, interpretivism entails a wholesale rejection of structure and a reification of agency, with interpretivists seeing power only in meanings and beliefs, and not at all in the 'real world' of hierarchy, access and capital. Yet a closer reading of the contributions to the symposium render this strict dichotomy problematic.

For certain, Rhodes positions himself closest to this understanding of interpretivism. His account begins, after all, with a lament about the rigid focus in mainstream public administration scholarship on institutions and organisational structures and processes. In calling for public administration scholars to look the humanities for new tools and techniques, he is in effect calling for them to put humanity at the centre of their endeavours. But even Rhodes here, as well as Hall in his account of the need for a conversion to thorough-going interpretivism in Australian IR scholarship, put stock in a soft or weak understanding of structure as traditions and practices co-constituted with the actors who inherit them.

Elsewhere in the symposium, structure plays a stronger role still. We can infer from Weller's account, for instance, in which he promotes Heclo and Wildavsky as crucial proto-interpretivists, that he might follow Wildavsky further in believing that analysts ought to 'speak truth to power', where power is seen to also come in tangible form distinct from the web of meanings that actors reinforce and reproduce. In Colebatch's agenda for interpretive research in Australia, too, there is the sketch of a faint but detectable hierarchy underpinning the elite, techno-rational, problem-solving approach that he claims has dominated public administration in Australia (and beyond) for too long. Colebatch's view is, in this sense, reminiscent of the highly influential work of Carol Bacchi, who draws on the Foucauldian notion of 'governmentality' to critically highlight the manner in which powerful actors use their privilege to reinterpret the scope and nature of policy work.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Colebatch's interpretive orientation also has striking

As an aside, we had hoped the collection would include a contribution reviewing the significance of Bacchi's work, as one of the most prominent Australian scholars working in this broad field, but sadly it was not to be. The collection is poorer for this omission but for some of Bacchi's recent work see Bacchi (2009; 2012) and Bacchi and Eveline (2010).

affinities with the notion of a path-dependent 'government knows best' tradition which also happens to be a key (but of course not the only) structure in Marsh et al.'s critical realist analysis.

What emerges from the various contributions to the symposium, then, is more a continuum than a strict dichotomy. At one end, the thorough-going interpretivism of Hall and Rhodes, sees only weak, co-constituted structure; at the other, the 'critical realism' of Marsh et al. sees structure in considerably firmer, albeit still 'dialectical', terms; but equally there are those, like Weller, Colebatch and Bacchi, who play in the space in the middle, where power, in tangible form if not in rigid structure, is seen as both constituted by but constitutive of interpretation.

### Interpretation and the truth

Interpretivism is also often seen, from the outside, as engendering a relativistic abandonment of the pursuit of 'the truth' in scientific research. But, once more, the contributions to this symposium reveal far greater nuance on this point. There is in fact a complex set of ideas at play about the degree of truth there should be in the claims interpretive researchers can make.

Firstly, this dissensus concerns the approach to interpretive research, and the prospect of objectivity therein. Closest to the common understanding of interpretivism in this sense is Colebatch. In setting up his agenda for research in contrast to a rationalist-objectivist approach, he implies a highly critical stance to any such endeavour. But not all the other contributors here bely such an orientation. Though Rhodes makes a point of criticising the naturalist assumption of an objective truth, for instance, he upholds an objectivity of sorts in calling for administrative ethnographers to authentically uncover the multiple, overlapping realities of the actors involved (and elsewhere has, with Bevir, advocated for an anti-naturalist version of objectivity as 'intersubjective agreement as governed by the rules of intellectual honesty'). And for some other contributors, it is in fact objectivity in the naturalist sense of the term that should remain an aspiration. This is perhaps unsurprising coming from Marsh et al., who explicitly maintain a faith in an objective reality which careful research can, if not entirely unveil, at least come close to approaching. But, even with one foot in the interpretive camp, Weller goes just as far, in his paper hailing Heclo and Wildavsky's determination to retain the social scientist's traditional commitment to objectivity. Indeed, he advances an approach to interpretation

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that very much still strives to ‘speak truth’, to emphasise the other half of Wildavsky’s famous turn of phrase.

Secondly, the contributions here speak to a deeper fissure still about claims to knowledge and how far they can extend. Most closely in line with the interpretive caricature sketched above, our own historical account of interpretation in Australian politics and policymaking scholarship sees the value in this approach as limited to a capacity to elicit deeper *understandings* of the subjective perspectives and experiences of political phenomena. Something like this seems to be implicit in Colebatch’s understanding of the work of interpretive analysis, too. But, interestingly, explicit in both Hall’s and Rhodes’s accounts is a notion that goes well beyond this. For Hall, studying interpretations, if done properly, can generate *explanations* of these phenomena; by studying the underlying beliefs of the actors involved, interpretive researchers can provide plausible accounts of the causal mechanisms that underpin their actions. Rhodes goes further still in defending the generalisability of the case-specific work that usually characterises interpretive research, arguing that the explanations provided in a single study can act as ‘plausible conjectures’ for like cases elsewhere. Hall’s and Rhodes’s thorough-going commitment to anti-foundationalism, in this sense, allows them to come full circle, and make claims to knowledge that even critical realists like Marsh et al. might deem too positive.

The upshot is an uneven, unsettled understanding of how interpretation relates to the truth, understood either as objectivity in approach or scientific explanation in outcome. The contributions to this symposium reveal that those who have an affinity with the banner of interpretivism conceptualise and operationalise this relationship in different and at times conflicting ways. Each is independently coherent, but the collective does not speak to a cohesive core, to say the very least.

### Interpretation and the *other*

The final fissure that we want to highlight in this introductory statement is in the understanding of how the study of interpretation relates to mainstream approaches to policy and politics scholarship in Australia. The popular image, again, is of a ‘counter-identity’ constituted against and disengaged from the mainstreaming, fractured and self-referential.

Yet it is on this dimension, more than any other, that the contributions in this symposium reveal the greatest diversity. Rhodes, in turning away from the traditional toolkit of social science and towards those offered in the humanities, would seem to be pushing most strongly away from the mainstream of administration and politics scholarship. Colebatch,

too, pushes off against the mainstream—the dominant rationalist impulse in the practice and study of public administration—to advocate for an agenda of inquiry in line with interpretivism.

Our own account, and that of Weller, are more reserved about embracing the ‘ism’ that goes with studying interpretation. Like Rhodes, in tracing a range of influential, mainstream figures in the study of Australian politics who predate, anticipate or work alongside self-labelling interpretivists, we explore work in the humanities or otherwise outside the established realm of political science. The point we want to advance, however, is not that these roots mean interpretive scholars ought to move further away from the social science mainstream, but that interest in interpretation has long been seeped into the mainstream, at least in political and policy studies. In making this claim, we advocate a more pragmatic approach that reaches out to and engages scholars operating in different paradigms or traditions. Weller, too, in linking interpretivism more explicitly with Heclo and Wildavsky, and in his characteristic eschewal of theorising in favour of substantive analysis, pushes the notion of a ‘broad church’.

More counterintuitively, Hall wants to do both – to inspire a more ‘thorough-going’ approach to interpretivism, and to unite a fractured scholarly community. His broad church, in this sense, refers less to conflicting or overlapping research paradigms (of the sort we have been discussing) and more to scholars operating with different and distinct, tools, techniques and types of data. In fact, he sees interpretivism not as a radical counter to predominant positivistic norms, but as a means of extending and unifying the fractured, ghettoised Australian IR community which is currently limited by its quasi-interpretative orientation.

Marsh et al. approach this issue from a quite different angle altogether. In their emphasis on the ideational or discursive component of their critical realist approach, they of course reinforce differences with the interpretivism of Bevir and Rhodes (though, as we suggest, some of these differences align them well with other self-labelling interpretivists). But they also clarify the areas of overlap and agreement, most fundamentally of all on the value of putting interpretation at the centre of analysis. The essence of their ‘two cheers’ sentiment is that interpretivists share more common ground with scholars operating in a broader range of orientations than is typically imagined.

We see, then, in the various contributions, conflicting accounts of how the study of interpretation relates to scholarship about politics and policymaking in Australia. This befits the complexity of this relationship in broad terms and the intricate web of connections (and pointed disconnections) among Australian scholars of an interpretive and non-interpretive orientation.

Instructive here, and an appropriate note to conclude on, is the experience of the symposium itself: prompted by the establishment of an Australian chapter of the Europe-based Interpretive Policy Analysis movement, the group has since been brought under the umbrella of the Australian Political Studies Association's Policy Studies Research Group, such that it stands neither completely alone nor has been entirely absorbed into the broader scholarly network. This, we suggest, is as apt an analogy as any for the uncomfortable, unsettled place of interpretation in the study of Australian politics and policymaking that the various contributions within the symposium convey.

#### References:

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