The Limits of Interpreting Evidence

Ted Hopf

Ohio State University

Department of Political Science

June 2000

“Do not interpretations belong to God?” Genesis 40:8

It is perhaps meaningful evidence of the confidence of both mainstream and interpretivist social scientists in the unproblematic meaning of their evidence that the word “evidence” appears neither in the index of *Designing Social Inquiry,* perhaps the best-selling mainstream methods text in decades, nor in the indices of any of the other books I cite here. Apparently evidence is a topic so derivative of so many other steps in the act of theorization that it does not merit separate attention. But in fact, of course, evidence is the heart of any knowledge claim. It is impossible to make an argument without presenting something one’s audience regards as evidence of what one is asserting. The broad question I consider here is what is evidence for interpretivists. What counts as evidence for them, and how may it be gathered? How does the interpretivist understanding of evidence differ from the mainstream, defined as stricter and looser versions of positivism? And finally, what do interpretivists think evidence can be used to say, or claim. In other words, what is evidence for? What can evidence be evidence of?

The aim of this chapter is most decidedly not to criticize either mainstream or interpretivist treatments of evidence. At most, a moreorless systematic comparison unfolds, from which emerges, I think, a rather surprising level of methodological commonality between the two. I begin with this collection of shared techniques before turning to the absolutely fundamental epistemological differences on the nature of evidence. It should be no surprise that the degree of difference and similarity depends greatly on which version of the mainstream and interpretivism one compares. I distinguish among three degrees of interpretivism: phenomenological, hermeneutic, and critical. In elaborating interpretivism’s positions on a host of issues, I differentiate among these three approaches, mostly bracketing the critical, as post-modern epistemology is not part of this chapter, concentrating instead on varieties of the first two.

It is important to stipulate that the interpretivism I assess here is the ideal version of that approach to social science, not necessarily its enactment in practice. Indeed, both accounts of the mainstream and interpretivism are based on what their practitioners and theorists write should or must be done to produce knowledge, not what actually happens in practice. It is important, of course, to ensure that ideals are compared only to ideals, and not an interpretivist ideal to a mainstream practice. That being said, so as to avoid the impression that interpretivist treatment of evidence is purely notional, I provide a fair number of examples of interpretivism in practice.

The broad difference between the mainstream and interpretivism is revealed in the dictionary.The first definition offered for evidence is divided in two. And these two different ideas map nicely onto the two sorts of inquiry being considered here. The first defintion of evidence refers to it as "an outward sign" or indication, while the second calls evidence "something that furnishes proof," or testimony. Interpretivist skepticism about the power of evidence in the last instance is captured by the first definition; the mainstream's conviction it can use evidence to produce absolute truth is immanent in the latter.

As I noted above, social scientists in general rarely treat the issue of evidence explicitly. In particular, it is very rare to come across an interpretivist, hermeneutician, critical theorist, or constructivist who self-consciously discusses issues of evidence. Despite ubiquitous arguments about epistemology and ontology, very rarely does one find arguments about what would count in favor of, or against, someone's position. This silence ensures that what follows is not a verbatim report on what interpretivists have written about evidence, but rather an inferential analysis of interpretivism's indirect treatment of it.[1]

I Shared Methods of Inquiry

The significant points of methodological coincidence between the mainstream and interpretivism resonate with the injunction of Hans-Georg Gadamer that the appropriate comparison between the natural and human sciences "is not a difference in method but a difference in the aims of knowledge."[2] While I will point out a substantial amount of diagreement between objectivist and interpretivist social science in the domain of techniques and method,

---

[1] For a most rare exception to social theory's silence on evidence, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, "The Centrality of the Classics," in Anthony Giddens and Jonathan H. Turner, eds. *Social Theory Today*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). Therein he writes that "persuasiveness is based on such qualities as logical coherence, expansiveness of scope, interpretive insight, value relevance, rhetorical force, and the beauty and texture of the argument." p. 22. One might, with all due respect to Alexander, still expect more elaboration.

[2] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Foreword to the Second German Edition of Truth and Method," in Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy, *After Philosophy*, p. 340. See also Alfred Schutz, who argued that it is a mistake to "disregard the fact that certain procedural rules…are common to all empirical sciences," and should not be ignored by interpretivists. Alfred Schutz, "Common-Sense

Gadamer's position is well-founded. I catalogue a very significant number of shared methodological practices between the mainstream and interpretivism. And the main differences I stress are not how evidence is gathered, but how it is employed and deployed, again consistent with Gadamer's distinction between methodological unity, but epistemological difference.

Despite the obvious differences, many scholars have pointed out that non-positivist, even anti-positivist approaches to the human sciences share important features with their avowed Other. Craig Calhoun, for example, has criticized those who conflate positivism in general with the 19th-century school and the Vienna Circle, while ignoring the inside-out critiques offered by those such as Karl Popper.[3] Others have pointed out that many post-positivists in fact borrow ideas from positivism.[4]

Among the shared methodological conventions are the clear differentiation of premises from conclusions; the respect for sampling characteristics of populations; the recognition that some standards of validation must be established for source materials; the differentiation of correlation from cause; the recognition that spuriousness problems accompany reliance on correlation; the acceptance of syllogistic, or deductive, logic; and the belief that others should try to contest or confirm one's findings. This could be considered a minimal list because, in practice, interpretivists actually adopt additional mainstream methodological techniques.

Pierre Bourdieu, for example, in arguing that religious power could be best measured by the outcomes it creates in non-religious areas of economic and political life, [5] demonstrated both an implicit awareness of the logic of crucial cases and the maxim that the farther a theory's predicted outcomes are away from its source, the more powerful that theory. Both of these are

---

and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action," in *Collected Papers. The Problem of Social Reality*, Vol. 1, ed. Maurice Natanson, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), p. 6.

[3] Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory. Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 40, note 40 and 64. On the possibility of a "third way" between universalism and particularism, rationalism and relativism, modernism and postmodernism, see pp. 133-34. See also Daniel Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Social Science*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 232.

[4] See, for example, Richard A. Shweder, *Thinking Through Cultures*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 59 and David Dessler, "Scientific Realism is Just Positivism Reconstructed," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Washington, D.C., March 28-April 1, 1994.

[5] Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in education*, *society and culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1977), p. 34.

mainstream conventions. Bourdieu further suggests a technique that looks a lot like process-tracing to guard against potential spurious associations between his associated variables of social practice and habitus.[6] He warns against permitting superficial correlation to supplant close causal reconstruction, and advises that one must reconstruct the causal interrelationships among the multiple possible origins of a social practice.[7] Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan, in their introduction to “interpretivist social science,” appear to adopt the mainstream, positivist, Popperian, Lakatosian convention of what makes a better theory; it is “one that encompasses its foe and makes its claim stick."[8] Even critical social theory, at least as understood by Brian Fay, must make its theoretical implications falsifiable, for the very practical reason that its practitioner will not be able to know whether it is having its desired effect unless the actions of subjects are accepted as evidence for its normative appeal.[9]

While the last example at least demonstrates that critical interpretivism can adopt mainstream methods, it mostly does not. At the post-modern, or critical, end of the interpretivist spectrum, there is a reasoned renunciation of concern for validity, conventionally understood. For example, on the issue of sampling, critical theorists wish to uncover anomalies in order to demonstrate inconsistencies in the dominant social structure. This is quite contrary to sampling for representativeness; indeed, it is really sampling for unrepresentativeness, most deliberately. Nor is it clear that a critical theorist would care to distinguish between correlation and cause. To the extent it is deep social structure that accounts for human action, simply demonstrating a consistent correlation between that hypothesized structure and the associated behavior should suffice as evidence. Lyotard argued that narrative knowledge, the kind that may be produced through interpretivism, “certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation and proof."[10] I consider this to be the boundary of my own analysis; I will not explore the meaning of evidence in the postmodern condition.

---

[6] On process-tracing as a technique to evaluate competing hypotheses in comparative case-studies, see Alexander George, “The Causal Nexus between Cognitive Beliefs and Decision-Making Behavior: The ‘Operational Code’ Belief System,” in Lawrence Falkowski, ed. *Psychological Models in International Politics* (Boulder: Westview, 1980), 95-124 and Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 56.

[8] Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, “The Interpretive Turn,” in Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds. *Interpretive Social Science. A Second Look* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 8.

[9] Brian Fay, *Critical Social Science*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 104.

Within my boundaries of phenomenological and hermeneutic interpretivism, there is present an acceptance, at least implicitly through practice, of a collection of mainstream methodological conventions. While it is important to remark these similarities, the balance of this chapter will elaborate on those fundamental epistemological differences that separate the mainstream from interpretivism.

II Making Evidence Meaningful. The Interpretivist Difference

If methodology somewhat unites the mainstream and interpretivism, epistemology largely separates them. But before turning to the significant differences, let me first point out several instances where, at least implicitly, interpretivists agree to standards of validity, to what constitutes superior knowledge, that would not alarm the mainstream.

For example, Clifford Geertz writes that interpretivism wants better explanations, and an explanation that can explain multiple behaviors.[11] He, in effect, is acknowledging that there are criteria for comparing one explanation to another and for deciding which is superior. Moreover, one of those criteria is that a single explanation should be able to explain a variety of outcomes over a range of domains. This is perfectly consistent with Popper's version of relative working truth. And Geertz uses mainstream techniques in his own work to demonstrate the superiority of his own interpretation.[12] For example, he claims that the meaning of the Balinese cockfight is as a metaphor for status hierarchies in the village. In order to support that claim Geertz uses a version of the method of difference. He points out that people from the same faction never bet against a cock from that faction; they bet for cocks in related kinship groups; and they support cocks from their village against those from other villages.[13] What he is showing here is that despite the probable outcome of a cockfight, and across different types of competition, villagers still behave the same way. It is a mainstream technique to establish covariation between one's causal variables, while controlling for alternative explanations.

---

[10] Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition," in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, eds. *After Philosophy. End or Transformation?* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), p. 80.

[11] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 27

[12] On Geertz's use of positivistic methods, see also Little, *Varieties of Social Explanation*, p. 238, n4.

[13] Geertz, "Deep Play," in Rabinow and Sullivan, *Interpretive Social Science*, p. 223.

A. What Counts as Evidence

Interpretivists, unlike the mainstream, rely on the inductive gathering of evidence as much as possible. Its theory of meaning is an empirical one.[14] Many interpretivists take seriously the injunction that all theorizing is destruction. While there have been periodic attempts by mainstream political scientists[15] to remind their colleagues of this truth, it is a systematic matter of concern to interpretivists. When George Marcus, for example, describes his ethnographic ideal it is a reproduction of evidence from the field that demands "hermeneutic sensitivity," or the rendering of the "actual uncertainty of life," rather than a "false unity." In other words, we observers must not impose an artificial order on the observed, regardless of how much more easily our theories may work as a consequence.[16]

The problem, from the ethnographic perspective, is how to "translate" what is observed into the language of the scholarly research without changing the meaning of the evidence. Translation, too, is an act of destruction. It is the production of evidence at the expense of the subects' lived reality. The ideal form of ethnographic evidence would be the overheard conversation, published without, ironically, any interpretation,[17] were it not for the objection that this too, is impossible. The observer's theoretical fingerprints would still be found on the tape.

Alfred Schutz offered a clear phenomelogical standpoint on this issue, arguing that "there are no such thing as facts, pure and simple. All facts are from the outset facts selected from a universal context by the activities of our mind. They are, therefore, always interpreted facts, either looked at as detached from their context by an artificial abstraction [as in the mainstream] or facts considered in their particular setting [as by interpretivists.]"[18] Neither the mainstream nor interpretivists can even describe, let alone explain and theorize, without simultaneously importing meaning. The difference is the latter accepts this as an epistemological given, not a corrupting intrusion to be ignored, explained away, or controlled for.

---

[14] Solace Mitchell, "Post-Structuralism, Empiricism, and Interpretation," in Sollace Mitchell and Michael Rosen, eds. *The Need for Interpretation. Contemporary Conceptions of the Philosopher's Task* (London: Athlone, 1983), p. 80.

[15] Albert O. Hirschman, "The Search for Paradigms as a Hindrance to Understanding," *World Politics* 22:2 (April 1970), 329-43 and Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 64:4 (December 1970), 1033-53.

[16] George E. Marcus, "Contemporary Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World System," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 183-184.

[17] It would seem that this would sit fine with James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*, pp. 106-10.

Interpretivist understandings of what evidence is relates directly to the relationship between the observer and her subject. The mainstream, of course, unless there is out and out bias or prejudice, ignores this issue entirely, assuming that any observer can be sufficiently objective and distant so as to not affect the meaning of the evidence.

Figure One About Here

The diagram in Figure One sketches out some of the relationships between the oberserver and her subject, and how that maps onto the epistemology and consequent method of the mainstream and interpretivism. Beginning with the positivist mainstream, we see that the scholar gathers evidence by directly observing the subject and the structuralist does the same by observing the social structure that presumably acts on the subject. These two approaches share both an absence of reflexivity and interest in the subject's own characterizations of his reality. Phenomenology, interpretivism, and hermeneutics, on the other hand, all share an interest in the subject's own story. But then they treat evidence differently from that point. First, intepretivists may or may not situate themselves in their own account of the evidence, whereas hermeneuticans are consistently reflexivist.. Moreover, hermeneuticans further may treat the social structure as a moreorless autonomous piece of evidence, and may or may not become evidence themselves, in terms of changing their own selves through the act of interpreting the subject.

Interpretivist positions on the relationship between the observer, or the theorist, and the subject, or the evidence, reveal whose reality matters, the theorist's, or the subject's. For both the mainstream and structuralists the answer is most often the theorist. For phenomenologists and mainstream scholars who use various modes of decision analysis, the answer is the subject's. But only interpretivists and hermeneuticians answer unequivocally both.

---

[18] Alfred Schutz, "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation," p. 5.

The first move of the interpretivist is phenomenological. He "must inductively gather evidence that allows [him] to evaluate the problem as the agent saw it."[19] This is not significantly different from applying a garden variety decision making approach to a social science problem. But the reconstruction of the subject's, or agent's, or actor's perspective and understanding may be only the first step. At this level of inquiry, it is expected that a treatment of the evidence acquires validity if the subjects themselves recognize that understanding as adequate.[20] In other words, the scholar reads back his interpretation to those he has interpreted. But this standard of validation is not uncontested. For example, Ricoeur argues that an interpretation, or what he calls a "configurational act" should NOT be intelligible to the subject of the interpretation, since the author's narrative rests upon a construction that no witness could have put together when the events were occurring.[21]

One might ask, why don't we just rely on asking people what they mean when they say and do what they do? The answer is the assumption that unobserved/able social structures exist in all social contexts, such that the meaning of an individual's actions and words are not his to control or interpret. Once spoken or done, a social practice becomes the property of the audience.[22] The observer's task is to reproduce as evidence both the subject's actions and the encompassing social structure. As Charles Taylor wrote, "we can never…have a clear view of the implications of what we say at any moment."[23] Imagine, for example, asking a white woman why she moved her handbag from one side of her body to the other when a group of black men were approaching on the other side of the sidewalk. She of course would deny her action was racist; and yet her action unintentionally reproduced a particular racial identity for those young black men: they are potentially dangerous felons.

---

[19] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 129-130. This is also the first move of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their pathbreaking book, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York: Anchor, 1966), p. 15.

[20] Schutz, "Concept and Theory Formation," in Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers,* p. 64.

[21] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, p. 157.

[22] See Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," *Social Research* 38:4 (1971), p. 534.

[23] Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 231.

There remains the inductive reconstruction of the social structure that provides meanings for the actions and words of the actor. Unlike structuralists, who collect evidence for the existence of such structures from patterns of behavioral outcomes in the field, interpretivists rely on reconstructing the intersubjective meaning of that structure for the subjects of interest. In other words, evidence of social structure is gathered through the actions of subjects, but not without their own understandings of those actions. A subject's intentions or preferences or interests, for example, are never understood by interpretivists as emerging directly from the subject. There must always be an accompanying account of the relevant sociohistorical context. Evidence does not consist of the actor's words alone.[24]

Interpretivists differ as to the evidentiary value of a subject's testimony. Heidegger argued that since the practical background can never be made completely explicit, it cannot be understood in terms of the beliefs of the subject. Paul Ricoeur goes a step farther, introducing the notion of a "hermeneutics of suspicion," whose task is to uncover the deeper, hidden truth that is masked by the meanings revealed through hermeneutic inquiry.[25]

Pierre Bourdieu described why it is utopian to ever hope to adopt, understand, and then reproduce, the standpoint of the subject one is trying to apprehend. In this selection he is arguing why it is impossible for someone outside the discursive formation, or habitus, of the working class to understand that position.

> The *narodniki* of all times and all lands, by identifying with their object to the point of confusing their relation to the working-class condition with the working-class relation to that condition, by speaking and writing as if it were sufficient to occupy the worker's position in the relations of production for a brief while, as observer or even as participant, in order to understand the worker's experience of that position, present an account of the working-class condition that is statistically improbable, since it is not the product of the relation to that condition which is ordinarily associated with the condition, precisely because of the condititionings which it exerts.… Putting himself in the place of a worker without having the habitus of a worker, he apprehends the working-class condition through schemes of perception and appreciation which are not those that the members of the working class themselves use to apprehend it.[26]

---

[24] Susan Hekman, *Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), p. 82.

[25] Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. xvii-xviii.

[26] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 372-73. For a similar argument that it is naive to expect to ever approximate the standpoint of the observed, see Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961), esp. chapters 1 and 2.

Finally, the author must include himself in any account of the subjects.[27] This does not mean trying to accomplish the unachievable aim of bracketing the meaning of one's own presence or interpreation. A scholar cannot understand the historical horizon of a subject by trying to abandon her own. Instead, she must comprehend the evidence through her own conceptions, while simultaneously realizing the perspective of her subject.[28] This is not merely the interpreter grasping the subjective intention of the actor, but it is a fusion of the author's horizon with that of the interpreter. Gadamer described the process as placing yourself in the position of the other not to generate empathy or to better apply one's own criteria, but rather to "attain a higher universality that overcomes, not only our own particularity, but also that of the other." This is the fusion of horizons of observer and subject.[29] The interpretivist assumption of intertexuality calls for an understanding of an actor's story in its complete relationship to all other stories available in a site, as well as in its relationship to the observer.

Pierre Bourdieu summarizes both the complexity of the hermeneutic demand and its compromise position between objectivism and relativism nicely: Unlike the mainstream, "objects of knowledge are constructed, not passively recorded..." One must not abandon "the active aspect of apprehending the world by reducing knowledge to a mere recording. To do this, one has to situate oneself within `the real activity as such'... One has to escape from the realism of structure, to which objectivism necessarily leads when it hypostasizes those relations by treating them as realities already constituted outside of the history of the group--without falling back into subjectivism...To do this, one has to return to practice, to the site...of structures and habitus.[30]

If we were to redraw Figure One as a hierarchy, rather than a circular space, we could specify the mainstream and structuralism first, with their uncomplicated direct access to the evidence of the subject and structure, respectively.

---

[27] That this is a big step away from and beyond phenomenology is obvious in Schutz's uncritical treatment of "The social scientist as disinterested observer." Schutz, "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation," pp. 36-38.
[28] Schutz, "Some Leading Concepts of Phenomenology," in Schutz, *Collected Papers*, 104-11.
[29] Quoted in Jurgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), p. 151.

Table One

What is Evidence?

A The Mainstream—-what is observed

B Structuralists--------observed social structures

C Phenomenologists-subjects' observations of self and structure

D Interpretivists--------**C** + observations of structure and subjects through each

E Hermeneuticians----**D** + observer's relationship with subject and structure

Clearly, what it is that a scholar must find in order to count as evidence becomes increasingly demanding as one moves away from the mainstream. Indeed, if one achieves the hermeneutic ideal, the hermeneutic circle, the observer will revise as well her own horizon, her own collection of theoretical priors or expectations in light of exposure to, and dialogue with, the subject.[31] Evidence, from this perspective, is gathered only when one's own perspective has been changed in some perspectival fusion with the subject. There is a deep ontological assumption underlying the interpretivist insistence on listening to the subject and reconstructing her intersubjective social structures. This is the belief that meaningful evidence can rarely be found at the surfaces of speech and action, but rather it must be surfaced by the observer, with the help of the subject.

Habermas, citing Cicourel, writes that it is the things taken for granted in any sociocultural world that form the basis of communication, and "inconspicuously bind the subject and object together." Therefore, it is essential that they be brought to awareness "through phenomenological reflection."[32] If mundane social practices are the evidence that intimate how subjects and social structures are creating and recreating themselves, then an interpretivist reconstruction of that evidence requires restoring the meaningfulness of the subject and her account.

B. Where to Find Evidence

---

[30] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 52.

[31] For this in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, see Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 137-50.

[32] Habermas, *Logic of the Social Sciences*, pp. 105-8.

In a certain sense it is unfair to compare mainstream and interepretivist evidence selection strategies, because they begin with such different objectives. The mainstream wishes to test theories, interpretivism to generate understandings. In other words, the mainstream tries to find evidence that would allow it to differentiate between the truth claims of competing statements about some class of outcomes, while interpretivism is looking for evidence that would allow it to provide a satisfying understanding of some social phenomenon. In Craig Calhoun's rendition of critical social theory, one compares one's own account with others and tries to determine what lays behind the differences in perspective. The end is not to declare victory, but to "incorporate the insights" of all accounts on consequently "stronger foundations."[33] The consequence is that the very purpose for gathering evidence in the mainstream necessarily constrains what will count as evidence. Since this constriction of the boundaries will occupy a significant part of the article in due course, I will only say that interpretivism has precisely the opposite impulse. While the mainstream wants to constrain the field of inquiry, interpretivism wants to expand it.

The mainstream has elaborated rules for case selection. These include random, stratified random, or strategic sampling of some population. Cases should be chosen so as to ensure variation in the value of the independent or dependent variables, a la John Stuart Mill's method of difference. The greater the number of cases analyzed, the better. The more variety across time, space, and culture in which the cases are situated, the better. These, and many more, may be found in *Designing Social Inquiry*. But all these rules are largely irrelevant to interpretivist concerns.

To the extent that mainstream rules are designed to promote the assessment of alternative theoretical accounts of a phenomenon, whether in a single case, or across some universe, they do not speak to interpretivist concerns. Interpretivists do not consider the competitive testing of theoretical implications to be what it is they do. Not testing theories, they are not concerned by method of difference, crucial cases, statistical significance, etc. Moreover, interpretivists cannot even imagine how it is possible to choose a case before one has gathered evidence on that case. In fact, they suspect the mainstream has already operated on a case if it is able to identify it as a case. In other words, while the mainstream treats the knowledge of what constitutes a case of something as self-evident, the interpretivist would argue that case-selection already pre-judges facts not yet in evidence.

---

[33] Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory. Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), p. 35. A Popperian reading of this could be simply that we account for all that others can explain and then some before declaring victory for ourselves.

To bring the point home, let's take the example of crucially hard, or crucially easy cases, which assume that some cases of a phenomenon produce more valid inferences than others. This convention is recommended especially if the number of cases available for analysis is small.[34] Interpretivists would find this mainstream position to be especially jarring because it so openly demands that the scholar substitute his own ideas, whether derived from the theory being tested, or not, for the meaning of the case for its subjects.

This kind of thinking is evident in James Caporaso's otherwise very cogent critique of *Designing Social Inquiry*.[35] Caporaso suggests that case selection can be used to enhance the a priori validity of evidence if it is designed so that whatever confirmatory results emerge are counterintuitive. The interpretivist observation is that what or who constitutes counterintuitiveness then becomes the unobserved measure of validity. Caporaso cites the work of Lisa Martin and Kathryn Sikkink in which they demonstrated "counterintuitively," and so with a priori greater validity, that Guatemala resisted international pressure to adhere to human rights norms, but Argentina did not. Why is this possibly counterintuititive? Because it violates "our" presumption that bigger, stronger countries are, well, bigger and stronger. So, weak Guatemala's resistance and strong Argentina's acquiescence is surprising. But doesn't this really only show that the apriori theory of power used by Caporaso, and ascribed to us, is inadequate, that a theory of power that included domestic institutions and social movements, would not have been so surprised with Martin and Sikkink's results, and so the theory they were testing would not have been adjudged to have survived a particuarly onerous test?[36]

---

[34] For case study methodology in general, and the utility of crucial cases in particular, see Harry Eckstein, "Case study and theory in political science," in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Strategies of Inquiry*, (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 79-137.

[35] James Caporaso, "Research Design, Falsification, and the Qualitative-Quantitative Divide," *American Political Science Review* 89:2 (June 1995), p. 458. This selection is only part of a wide-ranging special forum devoted to *Designing Social Inquiry* in which many mainstream critiques of the book are raised.

What the mainstream considers to be a trivial exercise in specifying what constitutes a case, in this case, a crucially hard case, in which a theory's implications can be tested, interpretivists see as an already executed act of theorization. That case has become a case of something through an act of interpretation by the scholar; its meaning was not pre-given or self-evident. Since mere description requires interpretation, understanding the meaning of actions and words in some context only trebles that demand. This is why evidence is not self-evident, but must be made meaningful through interpretation.[37]

C. What Evidence Can and Cannot Mean

Knowing what evidence is furnishes the background to a discussion of what evidence does. In general, interpretivists are far more circumspect in their expectations for evidence than the mainstream. Gadamer, for example distinguished between "being able to explain a fact completely through deriving all its conditions; through calculating it from the givenness of all its conditions," these being the ideal of natural scientific knowledge, and the far more modest claims of "interpretation, which we always presume to be no more than an approximation: only an attempt, plausible and fruitful, but clearly never definitive."[38]

The mainstream interest in testing theories means that even "problematic data," or evidence, should be made the best of by the scholar.[39] In other words, the observer must try to make the evidence meaningful to his theory, rather than allowing the evidence to have the meaning it has within the social context within which it is situated. If the theory cannot be tested on that data, so be it. One wonders just how "bad," or refractory, or disobedient, evidence has to be before the mainstream scholar will abandon his efforts to make that data matter for his theory.

---

[36] To be fair to Martin and Sikkink, they do understand power as domestically constituted. The next essay in the symposium replicates the problem of claiming a theory is more valid if it meets our own standards of plausibility. So, Ronald Rogowski cites the work of Peter Katzenstein and Robert Bates as "powerful" because both their accounts are underpinned by "universally accepted economic theory," and neither "contravenes the received wisdom…" Ronald Rogowski, "The Role of Theory and Anomaly in Social Scientific Inference," *American Political Science Review* 89:2 (June 1995), pp. 469-70. An interpretivist would not consider appealing to the power of conventional wisdom about some other theory to be a way of demonstrating the validity of one's interpretation of any particular case, or collection of cases.

[37] On the relations between description, understanding, interpretation, and explanation see: Paul Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, ed. Charles E. Reagan, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 165 and Gadamer, "Foreword," p. 342.

[38] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," in Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy, *After Philosophy*, pp. 331-32.

In what follows I establish what interpretivism believes to be the limits of evidence, the maximum possibilities that can follow legitimately from scholarly observation. On a significant number of crucial epistemological issues, interpretivism does not share the mainstream's confidence. Interpretivists, unlike the mainstream, do not believe it is possible to establish complete analytical or theoretical control over the subject being studied. Interpretivists further reverse the default drive of the mainstream, the latter believing that until a subject is revealed as meaningfully different from other like-labelled subjects, they are theoretically identical and may be treated as such. Interpretivists, quite to the contrary, assume meaningful difference among subjects until demonstrated otherwise. Interpretivists, unlike the mainstream, does not expect to gather evidence that would allow them to make predictions about the future behavior of subjects, even within a case, let alone about a class of subjects across the universe. An interpretivist prediction would be very narrow, confined within a case, to a limited period of time, and involving very few actions and actors. Needless to say, interpretivists do not understand how evidence can ever be used to establish universalisms or covering laws that are subsequently used to ground some blanket generalization about any social phenomena of non-trivial proportions.

1. Evidence is out of effective control

The kind of control the mainstream feels it must establish for its evidence to do its work is considered impossible by interpretivism. It is both logically and practically impossible to control for all alternative accounts of some outcome. It is illogical because of the inability of any observer to imagine all possible causes of some event. It is impractical because even if one could imagine all possible causes, it would be impossible to so effectively police the borders of one's evidence so as to guarantee that outcomes were not seeping in from outside the perimeter.[40] That is,

---

[39] Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 27.

[40] Besides conventional social science concerns about degrees of freedom, see Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in Rabinow and Sullivan, *Interpretive Social Science*, p. 78.

spuriousness can never be eliminated, no matter what the controls imposed. These are external threats to control. But even within the defense perimeter there are unavoidable challenges to control, because it is impossible to guarantee that the evidence whose meaning is established at T is in fact the same evidence at T+1. Unless the field is frozen in time and space, the meaning of one's evidence may have altered sufficiently to make the previous confident assertion of a causal relation nonsensical. Finally, it is obvious that establishing control over even one case is sufficiently difficult. Imagine what a strain it places on the validity of evidence across time and space and cases. This is one critical reason why, as we shall see, interpretivists are most hesitant to ever generalize across cases, and see even within-case generalizations to be problematic. Meanwhile, the mainstream seems to take neither concern seriously.

Now of course securing these boundaries is a primary mission of all social science, including the interpretivist version, but the interpretivist's task is either slightly easier, or immeasurably more difficult than the mainstream. This is because interpretivists recognize control as a problem that is very hard to solve, and so reduce their claims for evidence accordingly. It mostly seems as if the mainstream sees control as a technical problem, and so does not adjust its aspirations and expectations for its evidence accordingly.[41] The mainstream approach to this problem does not satisfy interpretivist standards, perhaps mainly because the mainstream is so easily satisfied with its solutions. One aspect of mainstream control is to assume that a given social phenomenon, say democracy, has only one significant meaning. This allows the observer to treat cases that are dramatically different on a host of dimensions, both seemingly unrelated to democracy and constitutive of an alternative definition of the same, as if they do not matter, as if they are controlled for. We usually think of control as ensuring the absence of some competing cause from the field; in the case of democracy, it is done definitionally, by making democracy mean only one authorized thing. What this does is reverse the logic accepted in analytical philosophy: instead of meaning preceding what is a fact; facts precede and often imply meaning.[42]

---

[41] See, for example, the high level of attention "omitted variable bias" receives in *Designing Social Inquiry*, but how easily it is expected to succumb to simple techniques, esp. pp. 168-82. On p. 172, for instance, we are reassured that it is possible to account for omitted variables because "[f]ortunately, in most cases, researchers have considerable information about variables outside their analysis." Interpretivists assume such information is often impossible to obtain.

2. Evidence is rarely identical

The secret to mainstream confidence in using evidence to test theories and develop generalizations for use in other places and times is its implicit assumption of identicality. It assumes that things, concepts, and individuals are meaningfully identical across time and space. Interpretivists believe that gathering evidence from a social context necessarily involves navigating through a thick and complex array of social actions, practices, and identities. The mainstream, on the contrary, sees complexity as something to control or manage, rather than as something to accept or accommodate.[43] Proponents of that approach argue, and correctly, that theory can elide complexity. But interpretivists decry this result; they don't celebrate it.

Far from accepting the principle of identicality, interpretivism quite diametrically assumes the principle of difference. The mainstream, to make its epistemological claims stick, would have to defend the logically impossible assumption that there is nothing meaningfully unique about any of the subjects and actions about which they theorize. Votes are votes. Wars are wars. Power is power. Everywhere and for all time.[44] Mainstream scholars have offered a fix to this problem, suggesting that while attaining "unit homogeneity" is often impossible, understanding the degree of unavoidable heterogeneity helps us estimate the degree of uncertainty or likely biases to be attributed to our inferences.[45]

From an interpretivist point of view, this misstates the problem, and so offers a misguided solution. The theoretically meaningful heterogeneity that so flummoxes the mainstream does not often present itself as such. If one knew which untheorized features of the field were relevant to understanding social outcomes, one presumably would have accounted for them in the a priori theory. Instead, an interpretivist expects to find heterogenity in her evidence, but this heterogeneity is not a problem to be solved, but rather evidence to be interpreted. Perhaps the difference is similar to that which separated eighteenth-century encyclopedists of natural history who alphabetized their entries because of "the sublime disorder of Nature herself, too prolific to enumerate or arrange…," and zoologists, like Linnaeus, who made all new discoveries fit into his already operating system of classification. But, reflecting the tension between homogenization and uniqueness, these "alphabetizers" still used the categories of "animal" and "quadruped—digitated, hoofed, pinnated, and winged."[46]

---

[42] On the relationship between meaning and fact in analytical philosophy, see Sollace Mitchell, "Post-Structuralism, Empiricism, and Interpretation," in Sollace Mitchell and Michael Rosen, eds. *The Need for Interpretation. Contemporary Conceptions of the Philosopher's Task*, (London: Athlone Press, 1983), pp. 54-89.

[43] King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, p. 10.

[44] This problem has long been recognized in political science. Giovanni Sartori, for example, pointed out three decades ago the perils of doing comparative research. He warned against "stretching" the meanings of variables across contexts in order to achieve some contrived generalization. See Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *American Political Science Review* 64:4 (December 1970), 1033-53.

[45] King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, pp. 93-94.

The mainstream counsels that scholars, "where possible," should homogenize their subjects only after "attaining an understanding of the richness of the history and culture."[47] Interpretivism advises precisely the opposite, and shifts the burden of proof accordingly. Until an observer demonstrates that these subjects are indeed meaningfully the same, in the same context, let alone across cases, they should not be treated as meaningfully identical.[48] In this way, interpretevists are like the early nineteenth-century British naturalist, John Fleming, who declined to classify hares and rabbits in the same family despite their many natural similarities because in the gestation of offspring, the hare was more like a horse, and a rabbit like a kangaroo, than either was like the other.[49] The mainstream way out of this dilemma is to allow the theory one is testing determine whether a feature is meaningful. But what if the theory, and in social sciences this is virtually always the case, is not perfectly specified so as to avoid omitting a meaningful source of variance? Interpretivism and the mainstream split on this foundational assumption. The former want to include potentially meaningful difference; the mainstream wants to exclude as much of this as it can feasibly get away with. After all, an interpretivist would argue that perhaps the gestation period is what is meaningful about these two animals, not all their other similarities. And the mainstream would argue if the gestation period has not been proven in the past to be associated with the outcome in which I am interested, I can safely ignore it.

---

[46] Quotes from William Frederic Martyn, in Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid and other Figments of the Classifying Imagination*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 24-25.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 43. The same problem exists for their advice to ignore irrelevant implications of a theory when searching for evidence. (p. 48) The interpretivists asks how can we know what is irrelevant in advance of loooking at the evidence from the field? For example, until the National Black Election Study was revised in the last decade, "theories" of democratic participation predicted voting and campaign contributions were "evidence" of such participation. Only after "interpretivist" scholars went to the field and found non-white political activity at rallies, church suppers, and at home, did the "theory" widen to treat these social practices as evidence, too. If theory, and its deduced implications, are allowed to drive the search for evidence, one will find what one searches for most of the time.

[48] Bourdieu clearly recognizes the need to theorize as if a working identicality is possible. He writes of constructing "objective classes" out of "agents placed in homogenous conditions" who "generate similar practices, possessing a common set of objectified properties." Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 101.

[49] Ritvo, *Platypus and Mermaid*, p. 27.

As Hilary Putnam has observed, the objective is to discover whether natural kinds, that is, a set of entitities that shares a common causal structure, and whose behavior therefore can be predicted on the basis of the laws that the govern the behavior of such entitites, can be found in the social world. In other words, do social kinds exist? Can revolutions, wars, and democracies, for instance, be treated for theoretical purposes as social kinds?[50] The answer depends both on whether all main causal effects are captured within the definition or model of the concept being employed and on whether those captured effects are properly specified. The interpretivist solution to this problem is that there is no solution, since it is impossible, logically, empirically, practically, and theoretically, to specify a causal model that could possibly account for everything that is excluded outside its boundaries, and everything that is purportedly causally effective within those boundaries.

But this does not mean that interpretevists reject the existence of evidence that can be treated as equivalent or identical within some boundaries. In fact, it is ironic that interpretivism objects to mainstream homogenization without often explicitly acknowledging that interpretivism itself uses a form of homogenization to make its theory work. Intersubjectivity is really a way of homogenizing various parts of society through common webs of meaning. If people understand the same social practices in the same way, isn't this an example of sameness, of homogeneity? If so, then doesn't interpretivism assume that homogeneity exists, at least in some social domains?

---

[50] Little, "Generalizations in the Social Sciences," pp. 190, 198-99.

And doesn't this demand from interpretivism a methodological technique to deal with both difference and similarity?[51]

3. Evidence is not always unique

Perhaps the most powerful attack on generalization has come from Theodoro Adorno and Franz Horkheimer. They argued that generalization was impossible and "all that is possible is purely destructive resistance to any attempt to confine the world within a single principle that purports to endow it with identi[cali]ty." Homogenization "makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantitities. That which does not reduce to numbers becomes an illusion; modern positivism writes it off as literature. Abstraction creates a herd, rather than unique beings."[52]

Despite this stiff challenge to the mainstream, one still must ask whether every social actor and action in fact is **meaningfully** unique? Logic itself, and certainly the collection of shared methodological conventions identified earlier would not be possible in the world of the unique, as one would need a separate account for every context, relationship, and interaction, of which there would be infinite variety. One can see that the uniqueness celebrated by interpretivism is just as logically vulnerable as the identicality of the mainstream.[53] Interpretivism, however, raises an issue of fundamental importance here that methodological expediency cannot address. Its interrogation of the mainstream's homogenizing impulse compels us to think about just how to guard against adducing identity where meaningful difference exists. How much of the world is really noncomparable?

---

[51] The difference between Positivist and interpretivist homogenization of social reality is that Positivism simply assumes homogeneity or uses a prior theoretical categories to impose it on difference, while interpretivism theorizes about and uncovers homogeneity, treating it as a social phenomenon to be discovered and understood, not as one to be assumed and inflicted. See Jurgen Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), p. 108.

[52] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993), esp. pp. 3-42.

[53] Bourdieu recognizes the extreme futility of each: "The only way of completely escaping from the intuitionism which inevitably accompanies positivistic faith in the nominal identity of the indicators would be to carry out--a strictly interminable--analysis of the social value of each of the properties or practices considered..." Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 20. Michael Shapiro appears to appeal for the interminable when he declaims empiricism for not being able to "develop an exhaustive and noncontroversial empirical specification for...terms...or conceptual

The separation between the mainstream and interpretivism on homogenization and difference is easily observed when we consider how each approach handles the anomaly, a piece of evidence that confounds its theory or understanding of some phenomenon. The mainstream response is similar to how naturalists and anatomists dealt with physical monstrosities in the nineteenth century. Rather than indicating systematic chaos or contingency, as an interpretivist might suggest, these anomalies instead provided opportunities to reaffirm the natural order and to define it with more precision. These anomalies were incorporated into more elaborate and powerful taxonomies.[54] While interpretivists try to place any given historical event within a narrative, within a contextualized bounded social structure, the mainstream places that same event within the framework of an opposition between the particular and the universal.[55] That is, the latter treats the historical event according to whether it is part of a more general story to tell about the world, or whether it is an idiosyncratic outlier that needs to be explained away somehow.

Mainstream theories are sticky, in the Lakatosian or Kuhnian sense. Single pieces of contrary evidence do not and must not be used to change the observer's account of the situation.[56] But, ironically, and perhaps only in this special regard, interpretivism is truer to Popperian positivism than the mainstream which adopts the practical and sociological defenses of Lakatos and Kuhn. Popper offers an account of falsification that resembles that of an open market, or a Darwinian system, at work. Explanations fail when they are no longer competitive, according to the falsification criteria established above, relative to the other available explanations. In other words, one's understandings are far more responsive to new evidence, no matter how anomalous, than would be the case in either a Lakatosian or Kuhnian world. The

---

systems." See Michael J. Shapiro, *Language and Political Understanding. The Politics of Discursive Practices*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 40.

[54] Ritvo, *Platypus and Mermaid*, p. 137. Based on an empirical evaluation of the history of science, Pierre Duhem pointed out the power of prior theories, methodological commitments, and other elements of the scientific project to ensure the rejection of anomalous findings. *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory*, (New York: Atheneum, 1962). Of course Lakatos, Kuhn, and Feyerabend also have offered different accounts of why theories are so sticky in the face of countervailing evdience. And as if these were not sufficient, there are excellent motivated and cognitive reasons to restore balance and persevere in one's prior beliefs.

[55] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 112.

product could be called a relative working truth, or, as Popper called it, “situational certainty.”[57] It is a relative truth in that its validity exists only in comparison to other possible accounts. It is a "working truth" in the sense that its validity is acknowledged to be a pragmatic convention, rather than an absolute fact, but one that can be accepted in daily practice until something more satisfactory comes along. It is a "truth" in the sense that it is believed to be contextually valid, within the prior two constraints.

Interpretivism is doubly Popperian. It resists both theoretical priors, sociologiocal and institutional consensus, and motivated and cognitive impulsion toward premature closure. It treats every anomaly as if it is, at least potentially, meaningful.[58] The mainstream, on the contrary, rejects treating every disconfirming instance as a serious challenge, instead appearing to don the protective belts offered by a Lakatosian research program, or the Kuhnian mantle of normal science toiling on within a settled paradigm.

Hypothetically, let’s assume we test the democratic peace in a large-n comparative case-study format. The results confirm that institutional constraints matter, but the glaring empirical anomaly is that citizens rarely, if ever, express their opinions on foreign and national security policy issues in democracies. This clearly undermines the theory, falsifying one of its empirical links. But one possible mainstream response is to be even more strongly convinced of the theory’s validity. After all, even without strong and active participation by citizens on the issue of concern, democracy still works! An interpretivist would never let such an anomaly pass. The question would become: why do the states we call democracies not fight each other, despite the fact that they are not meaningful democracies. What counts as confirmatory evidence for the mainstream only signals the need for a broader and deeper understanding from the interpretivist.

Critical theory’s commitment to “shaking false self-evidence, demonstrating its precariousness, and of making visible, not its arbitrariness, but its complex interconnection with a

---

[56] See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[57] Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 78-81.

[58] Of course, Popper was never the naïve falsificationist who argued that a single disconfirmation meant the abandonment of the imperfect theory. No, the disconfirmation had to be accompanied by an alternative theory that could account for all that the failed theory had accomplished, plus.

multiplicity of historical processes,"[59] ensures that the unexpected or the aberrant are treated as evidentiary opportunities for exploring the contingency of some settled reality. And then the search for additional evidence ensues, the "rediscovery of connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies, and so on that at a given moment establish what subsequently counts as being self-evident, universal, and necessary."[60]

Not wishing to leave critical theory in a state of self-adulation, let me point out that it produces its own homogenization of observed reality. Because of the philosophical commitment to the idea that power is immanent in all social relations and must be unmasked in order for emancipation to become possible, one can find Bourdieu arguing that one must look beneath the surface of commuinist and capitalist societies, at the fundamental relations of those societies, in order to discover that they are basically the same. There is opposition between the dominated and the dominating, a relation that at different moments can be inscribed in phenomenologically different practices.[61] The question would be what is the identicality of communism and capitalism uncovered by Bourdieu evidence of, precisely?

4. Generalizing within a case: challenging the tyranny of the unique

Interpretivism clearly cannot sustain the position that all evidence is unique, and does not, in practice. The question remains, however, of how it is possible to determine whether evidence is the same, or not. There appear to be three mainstream answers to this question: available applicable theory; best empirical observation; logical deduction from an unrelated model. But notice that all of these choices, in themselves, entail the most consequential assumption, that meaningful identicality already exists. If not, one could not conclude that a theory already exists that is applicable, that the empirical observations already performed are sufficient, and that a model operating effectively in another domain is relevant in this one. In other words, the mainstream necessarily prejudges evidence as similar. Interpretivism, most significantly, has precisely the opposite default. It assumes identicality must be demonstrated to exist, and the search for evidence must first entail the establishment, in this case, of the relevant meanings of that which is being assessed. But if interpretivists were to be consistent with their views of the unique, they would not be able to say anything general even **within** their cases. They nevertheless regularly do make such claims within their cases, suggesting an implicit assumption that generalization is somehow possible within a case. And if this is true, the tyranny of the unique does not operate at all times, in all contexts. In other words, interpretivists themselves are not consistent followers of their own creed.

---

[59] Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method," in Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy, *After Philosophy*, p. 103.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 104. See also Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society. Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 164-70.

[61] These arguments of Bourdieu, although not the gloss I have given them, appear in Alexander, *Fin de Siecle Social Theory*, p. 189. For similar observations about the postmodern potential to become "the mirror image of Enlightenment universality," see Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory*, p. 91.

Clifford Geertz, for example, when discussing his methods in understanding the meanings of the Balinese cockfight, stressed that he frequently generalized within the case, i.e., he observed actions by some, and subsequently attributed the same meaning to their behavior and to others who engaged in the "same" behavior.[62] One could multiply this, with a close reading of Geertz' text, dozens of times. Observers frequently make implicit judgments about what meanings can "safely" be generalized to some population larger than one. The fact that Geertz, and other interpretivists, do generalize within cases establishes that they do in fact consider evidence to be generalizable, at least within a case. But how do they determine this, if they are deprived of the mainstream techniques? The answer is they establish boundaries for meaning, such that evidence means the same thing within the boundaries as specified.

Meaningful evidence for interpretivists is intersubjective, intertextual evidence. It is the understanding that results from realizing that a person’s actions and words are not fully her own, but rather in a constitutive relationship with a broad array of social practices and structures. The observer must try to recover those structures and practices in order to give meaning to that individual’s actions. Then, and only then, do these observations qualify as evidence. But despite the centrality of interrelatedness to interpretivist epistemology, its adherents rarely offer useful advice for how precisely to bound one’s analytical context. That social theorists recognize the boundaries of meaningful action to be a major issue may be inferred with just how many different terms are used by so many different theorists to describe this space: Bourdieu's habitus; Foucault's discursive formation; Althusser's problematic;[63] Wittgenstein's form of life;[64] Heidegger's clearing; Somers's knowledge culture; Kuhn's paradigm; Gramsci's hegemony; Lakatos's research program; and others, I am sure. These are the spaces within which interpretivists of all stripes implicitly assume meaningful generalizations about human actions and speech may be defensibly made. A common feature to all is the fact that it is understood that whatever is happening within those boundaries is potential evidence, and what is outside of each of them is not.

Rabinow and Sullivan, for example, claim that the intelligibility of any action requires reference to its larger context, "a cultural world," as they call it.[65] But just where are the boundaries to this injunction? How would anyone know when to stop looking for relevant connections and interrelationships with others beyond the last established boundary? But on what basis are boundaries to be established?[66] As Alexander rightly observed, reconstruction of a "total sociohistorical context is a chimera."[67] One can neither observe all that one "should' observe as meaningful within any context, nor can one specify precisely where that context "should" stop. Gadamer stipulates that the first principle of hermeneutics is to "admit the endlessness of the task. To imagine that one might ever attain full illumination as to motives or interests in questions is to imagine something impossible." So, what to do? One can "clarify what lies at the basis of our interests as far as possible. Only then are we in a position to understand the statements with which we are concerned, precisely insofar as we recognize our own questions in them."[68] So, intersubjective boundaries, such as they are, softly delimit the terrain between observer and subject, but do not even touch on the boundaries of the subject herself.

---

[62] Geertz, "Deep Play," in Rabinow and Sullivan, *Interpretive Social Science*, pp. 195-240. On Geertz as a generalizer, see Alexander, *Fin de Siecle Social Theory*, pp. 99-119.

[63] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, (London: Verso, 1965/1996).

[64] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (1953)

[65] Rabinow and Sullivan, "The Interpretive Turn," p. 14.

[66] Foucault observed that there are a "plethora of intelligibilities, a deficit of necessities," implying the absence of any limit to intersubjectivity. Foucault, "Questions of Method," p. 106.

[67] Alexander, "Centrality of the Classics," p 48.

[68] Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," p. 334.

Jurgen Habermas is one of the few social theorists who actually suggests how boundaries of intersubjectivity might be developed. He writes that “primitive societies” have an advantage of being relatively “easy to delimit” and of being “relatively static.” But such relatively isolated unchanging social formations are not so easy to find these days. Instead, an observer must get along with cases where social norms have so institutionalized cultural patterns or values that they are understood as structures within self-regulating systems. Only then can social processes be analyzed on the basis of assumptions about an understandable empirical context of organized behavioral expectations.[69] In other words, objects of study will vary in their susceptibility to an interpretivist account; the more open they remain, the less satisfying the interpretivist account.

One of the more ironic differences between the mainstream and interpretivism is their opposite reactions to more evidence. More evidence for the mainstream scholar is a means to generate higher confidence in his arguments because it is more data to test against the competing theories, or permits him to increase the number of in/validating observations. On the contrary, more evidence for an interpretevist reduces her confidence because it expands the boundaries of intertextual meaning that must be accounted for in any account of the subject. As Hayden White put it, the more we know about the past, the more difficult it is to generalize about it.[70]

While the mainstream claims that its choice of boundaries is defended ultimately through the act of competing successfully against alternative explanations for the phenomena being studied, interpretivists wish to claim that their boundary is justified by the fact that the understanding being offered has accounted for all possible interpretations within the field. Neither position is defensible. The mainstream can never account for alternative explanations left necessarily unconsidered; interpretivism is equally incapable of accounting for meanings and understandings beyond the essentially arbitrary domain of the "cultural world." What is unavoidable here is convention.

---

[69] Habermas, *Logic of the Social Sciences*, pp. 78-86.
[70] Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 89.

There are several conventions that might help interpretivists bound their domains. The first is to stop interpreting when one is satisified with the understanding one has reached. Satisfaction could be gained by accounting for alternative explanations, by exhausting the available empirical record, or by being reassured that other scholars are already at work extending and refining one's own account. A second possibility is suggested by Linda Alcoff's interpretation of Foucault's epistemology.[71] One could infer from her argument that Foucault has a "coherentist" epistemology that the boundary of a domain is established by exhausting the meaningful relationships among the pieces of evidence. As she puts it, if there "is no discernible connection or relation" to any other element, the element being observed "is without meaning," at least to the subject being analyzed, and hence, to the observer. If satisfaction of others could be the external boundary of one's theorized domain, then the exhaustion of the subjects could be the internal governor on the search for yet more intersubjective meaning. For example, when assessing the merits of the democratic peace, an interpretivist might investigate how the death penalty is understood in different democracies, based upon the connection between the state, citizenship, race, and violence, but would not be similarly moved to consider hair color, number of cities over 100,000 population, or aluminum consumption.

While of course the latter seem silly, it is not so silly to know what to exclude. There is no mainstream justification for including the death penalty in any test of the democratic peace, and yet there is an interpretivist one. The silly exclusions are overdetermined, but inclusions are more problematic for the mainstream.Take, for example, Thomas Schelling's famous white flight simulation.[72] He assumes that people only care about the racial identity of a maximum of eight houses around them. This would be an example of an extremely thin boundary, one that could not accommodate people who think in terms of streets, blocks, neighborhoods, or cities. But why don't I go on to say states and countries? It is because I have an implicit theory of meaning that I import into my presentation of the boundaries of meaningful intersubjectivity. But in fact, in a country like apartheid South Africa, the whole country probably was a meaningful boundary;

---

[71] Linda Alcoff, "Foucault as Epistemologist," *The Philosophical Forum* 25:2 (Winter 1993), pp. 95-124.

[72] Thomas Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: Norton, 1978)

indeed the very continent of Africa itself was meaningful to white households considering residential segregation patterns. Many more than eight contiguous houses mattered. Schelling's model would be irrelevant in such a context.

Yet another potential interpretivist solution to the problem of meaningful boundaries comes from the work of Schutz, on the one hand, and Garfinkel, on the other. In describing intersubjectivity, Schutz identified that world's borders as wherein "what is taken for granted by me is also taken for granted by you…But this We…includes everyone who is one of us, i.e., everyone whose system of relevances is substantially (sufficiently) in conformity with yours and mine."[73] In other words, the boundaries of an intersubjective world encompass actions and words considered natural to all participants. While Schutz establishes the criteria for inclusion, Garfinkel spent most of his career conducting experiments to uncover the boundaries of exclusion. By probing what people thought, during interactions with others, to be unacceptable, strange, incomprehenisble, and surprising, Garfinkel mapped the domain of the intersubjectively naturalized. What he called breaching background expectancies define the edges of intersubjective understanding.[74] Such methods could be used to establish an interpretivist's domain of meaningful identicality and difference, as well. For example, asking a sample of citizens in a collection of different countries adjudged democratic about what democracy actually means to them could be a way of sketching the preliminary boundaries of the meaning of the normative account of the democratic peace. One might find, for example, that Americans, when asked if the death penalty is compatible with democracy, respond with bewilderment or hostility to the question, just as hundreds of Garfinkel's subjects did to questions about their mundane background expectancies. Note here how the method used to gather relevant evidence is not necessarily anthropological. Garfinkel himself used medium to large-n experiments, but a large-n survey could be employed, or a number of focus groups, or documentary analysis, or in-depth interviews, or participant-observation. As I have suggested, it is not so much methodological technique that separates interpretivist treatment of evidence from the mainstream, as it is the meaning and purposes of evidence, or epistemology. Finally, Karl Deutsch perhaps brought the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion together in his definition of a community as a group of people who understand themselves to have more in common with each other than with anyone not inside those borders.[75] Applied by an interpretivist, this device would hypothesize that the boundary of a domain is being reached as the levels of self-understanding in a community shift from within to beyond.

---

[73] Schutz, "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation," pp. 12-13.

[74] Haorld Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), esp. ch. 2.

5. Generalizations and predictions across cases is not impossible

Given its skepticism about the ability to control any domain of theorizing about the social world, and its presumptively high regard for the unique and the contextual, interpretivism's position on the ability to make predictions about other cases, or generalize its local understanding to more universal locales should be manifest. Since domains vary in unknowable ways, it is futile to make statements that are expected to apply in other "identical" cases. In other words, differences that may not even be discoverable by an external observer, may make variables incommensurable across contexts, and so render efforts at generalization hopeless.[76] As Brian Fay has pointed out, to the extent an explanation is nomological in character, it explains kinds of events by showing that they are instances of generally recurring patterns of a lawful type. This position renders illegitimate theories that assert that social phenomena are uniquely related to the culture in which they occur.[77]

Related to discovering that there are differences in social phenomena that make meaningful identicality, and hence, universal and general truth claims and covering laws, impossible, is the issue of incommensurability. Barbara Herrnstein Smith lays out the parameters of this problem very nicely. “The question is whether, as is traditionally maintained, rival theories are always ultimately measurable against a common standard…so that…their divergent claims may be compared and the superior ones chosen accordingly; or if,…there are conditions under which…conflicting theories cannot be measured or compared that way: when, for example, they assume radically divergent but equally credible conceptions of the universe [not so important to our concerns], or,…when part of what divides the parties is how to understand the standards (*truth, rationality, evidence*)…by which the merits of their divergent theories could be measured….”[78] The latter of course is precisely the focus here.[79]

---

[75] Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1953).
[76] See, for example, Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 79. See also Ira J. Cohen's comprehensive review of Giddens's structurationism. He, perhaps too deftly, differentiates between structurationism's rejection of "uniformitarianism," but warm embrace of "reproducibility." "Structuration Theory and Social Praxis," in Anthony Giddens and Jonathan H. Turner, eds. *Social Theory Today* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), esp. pp. 280-302.
[77] Fay, *Critical Social Science*, p. 46.

So, for example, are Russian and German democracy commensurable? Sure, each has elections, legislatures, a federal system, among other things. But the argument here is that looking for what these two countries shares already prejudges which evidence will be gathered, what meaning will be given to it, and ensures the calculated elision of all difference that does not rotate along the axis given by the theory’s priors. The mainstream’s search for the common and the uncommon only along the common’s dimensions, according to interpretivism, destroys the very meaning of that which is being observed. An interpretivist observation is impossible for the mainstream because any observation must serve as a support or a disconfirmation of a theory. It cannot become an observation until and unless it can be used within a relevant theoretical context.[80]

The appropriate position here is a deep skepticism of replicability accompanied by the intuition that some social phenomena are more replicable than others.[81] For example, a particular observed social practice should be expected to recur: the greater the number of times it has been observed in the past; the greater the span of time over which it has occurred; the broader, deeper, and more distinctive the cultural contexts in which it appears; and the more independent observers agree that it has occurred. The capacity to predict should be treated as a variable that never approaches unity, may be zero, but should always be regarded with great doubt. With respect to prediction in particular, it should be stressed that interpretivism accepts bounded predictions, predictions about future outcomes that are deeply contextualized in understandings of the social milieux that produced the present. The logic of prediction remains the same in the mainstream and interpretivism. The critical difference is in the expectations of the range, scope, durability, and ambition of such predictions. Interpretivists will always defend more modest claims than the mainstream. If one believes that boundaries are hard to specify, and the social world is hard to control, then one must be careful in making claims about future outcomes.

---

[78] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Belief and Resistance. Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 125-26.

[79] This is of course an important theme in Thomas Kuhn’s and Paul Feyerabend’s It should be pointed out that Gadamer rejects the relativism of Kuhn, Feyerabend, Winch, Rorty, and Geertz, arguing that a hermeneutic circle is always possible between observer and subject. In Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, pp. 141-44.

[80] Alcoff, “Foucault as Epistemologist,” p. 105.

[81] Jonathan Turner has urged that we not confuse law with empirical generalization in Turner, “Analytical Reasoning,” in Giddens and Turner, *Social Theory Today*, p. 160.

Any generalization, within a case or across cases, assumes that it is possible to specify the existence of certain conditions, whose causal or constitutive meanings will be effectively the same across some designated time and space. Some of the shared methodological techniques described at the beginning of this paper may help determine how confidently we can assert that these meanings are in fact portable. Among the many indirect techniques are observation of the expected variance, or covariation, across contexts; increasing the number of observations across most different domains; process-tracing the hypothesized links between variables; and consideration of alternative accounts. Each of these is only an indirect gauge of meaning's generalizability. The range of evidence offered by the interpretivist, from phenomenological observation to the hermeneutic circle, provides an additional, and critical, source of information about the possibility of generalizing beyond a single episode.

It bears repeating here that social theorists do generalize. For example, Foucault has written that his methodology of "archaeology provides the principle of the discourse's articulation over a chain of successive events."[82] Bourdieu, not unlike Foucault, sees the habitus as a formation that "produces practices which tend to reproduce regularities."[83] The final word can be Bourdieu’s; it squares the circle between the twin tyrannies: particularism and homogenization. "I believe it is possible to enter into the singularity of an object without renouncing the ambition of drawing out universal propositions."[84]

The distinction could be drawn between open and closed systems. Interpretivists believe that all systems or fields of inquiry are necessarily open; one cannot pretend, or devise methodological tools, to reverse or manage this reality.[85] The mainstream commits a two-step error by stipulating a closed context within which to theorize. First, they improbably claim the capacity to control for all possible factors that might be affecting the subjects in which they are interested, and then, second, they take the results from that presumably closed environment and claim they obtain in myriad other environments, presumably no more closed than the originating first.[86]

---

[82] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 167.
[83] Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 78.
[84] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. xi.

III Interpretivist Evidence at Work

It might be useful to conclude this essay with an example of an interpretivist account of some common theoretical claim. Imagine there are two countries who are not allied, are both very poor, share a long common border, have been at peace for 230 years, have had more than a few border disputes over those decades, all of which have ended peacefully, and have both been democratic all that time. A mainstream IR theorist who wanted to test the democratic peace would be ecstatic with the strong confirmation the theory receives. After all, all known (at least to other IR theorists) confounding variables—alliance ties, wealth effects, and non-contiguity—have been "controlled" for. Moreover, the dependent variable has the right value—peace. And still more, it could be called a crucially hard case, because the two countries have experienced real conflicts of interest over their borders that might have led to war in different circumstances, counterfactually speaking, but have remained at peace. QED

But the interpretivist approaching this problem would not be at all convinced that the democratic peace was accounting for this peace. At the phenomenological level, interpretivists would ask the citizens and leaders of these two countries why they think they have never gone to war, as well as pore through 230 years of diplomatic archives to see how those figures understood their relationship. Let's assume the answer the interpretivists get is that "we are just like each other." This answer would of course satisfy the mainstream scholar, as he knows they are alike; they are both democratic; he has already established that, and phenomenological inquiry only confirms his assertion. Switch now to the more demanding hermeneutic approach, an investigation of the citizen's views, the discoverable social structure, and the observer's own position.

---

[85] For example, King, Keohane ,and Verba recommend addressing the problem of uncertainty with an "uncertainty estimate." Interpretivists just recognize and live with it; they don't believe it is something to be resolved. *Designing Social Inquiry,* pp. 9, 32, and 94. In contrast, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, p. 135.

[86] Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," in Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy, *After Philosophy*, p. 474. Something I learned while studying nuclear exchange scenarios was that

The hermeneutic scholar begins to dig a little deeper; she finds out that her subjects are now even willing to acknowledge it is the fact that they are two democracies that explains their pacific feelings for each other, their meaningful similarity. The mainstream is ecstatic, since now they even have literal evidence for their theory. But the hermeneutician is just beginning, suspecting there may be more to the story. He is alerted to this possibility by figuring out his own position in this act of interpretation. What puzzles him is why so many people with whom he speaks either cannot say what it is about being democratic that makes them trust each other or, alternatively, sound just like a Bruce Russett reader on the question. He realizes, through reflexive analysis, that it might be his very presence as a researcher from the US Institute of Peace in Washington, DC that is evoking the seemingly unanimous and confirmatory response.

To pursue his hermeneutics of suspicion, the researcher must try to recreate the social structure of his respondents. In so doing, he realizes that the citizens living in the two countries actually share an origination myth that claims they have common origins in some verdant valley in Zimbabwe. He discovered this myth not phenomenologically, but by piecing together various daily social practices shared by the two peoples: how children are disciplined, cuisine, cultural artifacts, familial relations, etc. The hermeneutician had discovered another basis of similarity, one not related to democratic practice. In order to find out whether in fact this set of social structures might account for peace through sameness, the researcher read her account back to her subjects. At first, they denied this to be the case, since they never thought of things that way, in no small part because the international social structure, once interrogated, revealed a strong bias against peoples with origins in this particular African valley. But finally, gradually, they conceded that in fact they did share these features, and at times even thought of those in the other country as part of some more general family, rather than foreigners in another state. But the social

---

when one multiplies even very high probabilities (.9) of accuracy, it does not take very long to practices had become so normalized and natural, so much a part of daily routine, their explicit manifest meaning went unremarked by both populations. It took the disruptive inquiry of the suspicious hermeneutician to surface these deeper meanings of surface practices.

The most modest contribution that interpretivist evidence has to offer in this example is the possibility that alternative accounts exist that simply cannot be accessed by the mainstream, and so the latter’s results can be spurious with a very low probability of detection with mainstream methods. But the interpretivist could make other, less modest, claims as well. For example, she might have established that these particular identity practices travel across the two cases, allowing for a useful comparison of their effects on state policy, which, after all, is the dependent variable of the democratic peace. Speaking more generally, it might be possible to stipulate that the presence of these particular identities in other countries, maybe even authoritarian ones, can account for peace among that population of states. In other words, interpretivist evidence may not only offer alternative accounts, but also furnish a basis for comparison and generalization beyond a single case. But of course, only with meticulous adherence to the interpretivist discovery of evidence beyond the single case. So, discovering another state whose people call themselves the same name as the first two cannot establish the existence of the necessary social structure with its affiliated practices. To count as interpretivist evidence demands much more.

---

approach zero.