

Bridging Positivist and Interpretative Approaches through Annotation for Transparent Inquiry

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Annotation for Transparent Inquiry (ATI) is an approach to transparency that provides opportunities for researchers to share evidence and explain the logic of their published claims.¹ Through annotations, researchers can delve into the complexity and contradictions that emerge from research, share qualitative data, and provide interested readers with rich context that deepens their understanding of the worlds we seek to study. This article describes how and why I used ATI in a research project that integrates both positivist and interpretative analysis. I argue that ATI offers fruitful avenues for scholars who seek to incorporate an “ethnographic sensibility” and interpretative methods into positivist work (Allina-Pisano 2009; Wedeen 2010, 259–60) in order to avoid the flattening that often happens when researchers try to condense arguments about fascinating, vibrant, and puzzling political phenomena into the strictures of a 10,000-word political science article. After identifying the benefits of ATI for my work, I discuss strategies to enable researchers to reap these benefits in a time-effective way, and I offer guidelines on how to decide what to annotate and when a researcher should begin annotating in the writing process.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT: THE POLITICS OF HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMES IN URBAN SECURITY

I used ATI for a multi-paper research project that examined the causes, content, and impacts of human rights frames to justify militarized urban-security interventions in Bogotá, Colombia (Mayka forthcoming).² The papers analyze a massive intervention to eliminate a skid-row zone known as “the Bronx” in Bogotá’s city center, which was the epicenter of organized crime, open-air drug consumption, and homelessness. The Bogotá government framed a 2016 intervention to shut down the Bronx as an effort to advance the human rights of children who were being sexually exploited. This rights frame facilitated implementation of the intervention, which ultimately yielded new rights violations for marginalized groups, including people experiencing homelessness. The papers draw on a wide range of qualitative data sources generated through fieldwork in 2017 and 2018: in-depth interviews with diverse stakeholders; text-based sources, including responses to freedom-of-information requests, transcripts of congressional hearings, and policy reports; social media posts

by government officials; content analysis of 615 newspaper articles; and ethnographic observation.

The papers in this project engaged both positivist and interpretative approaches. On the one hand, I asked causal questions about why human rights frames are adopted in some contexts but not in others and about the causal impacts of rights frames on policy processes. On the other hand, this project analyzes the social and political construction of rights ideas and when they gain political power. The project thus explores causal questions while taking seriously the processes of meaning-making that are at the heart of interpretative work (Schatz 2009, 5).

BENEFITS OF ATI FOR BRIDGING POSITIVIST AND INTERPRETATIVE APPROACHES

Space constraints of academic journal articles make it difficult to engage in both causal process tracing and interpretive analysis within the same article. I adopted ATI in an attempt to bridge the two approaches, using annotations to showcase my rich qualitative data and to provide more space for in-depth description and interpretation. ATI yielded four benefits for this effort to integrate interpretation into my positivist work, ultimately strengthening my causal analysis.

First, ATI enabled me to provide a richer description of the complex political, economic, and social world of my case than I otherwise would have been able to offer. Positivist researchers face strong incentives to cut back on vivid descriptions that deepen a reader’s understanding of context but are not essential for causal analysis. Rich description is difficult to fit within the restrictive length of a political science article (Schwartz-Shea and Majic 2017, 99)—and is even more challenging for an author who also aims to engage in process tracing and causal analysis.

I addressed this bind by moving some descriptive and interpretative analysis to annotations. I used annotations to share information generated from observation, informal conversations, and my interviews with people with firsthand experience in the Bronx. For example, one annotation discusses a rumor raised by a top state official during an interview. This official claimed that in the Bronx, criminal organizations sold drugs mixed with human remains, with their aim of dehumanizing drug users by making them feel that they had severed ties with “normal” society. The rumor

was offered as evidence that homeless people and drug users were enslaved by criminal organizations and needed to be saved by the state to protect their human rights. The same annotation relays a conversation I had with a former sex worker from the Bronx, who confirmed that she had heard the rumor but questioned its validity, perceiving it as fear-mongering to exoticize the Bronx. This annotation thus offers a snapshot into the complex violence that operated in the Bronx, as well as the distinct interpretations of state actors and groups that the state is claiming to “rescue.” These discussions

public officials on the morning of the intervention and a video of the intervention. These annotations enhanced the validity of my assertion that the government sought to develop the rights frame across diverse media. ATI provides promising opportunities for scholars of political communication and framing, as well as for scholars who adopt an interpretative approach to analyze the use of symbols, language, and images in political meaning-making.

Fourth, I used annotations to engage with the inevitable contradictions that emerged in my qualitative data.³ With

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deepen a reader’s understanding of the Bronx by challenging simplistic understandings that accept the government’s message that militarized force was righteous and essential to restore the rights of marginalized groups.

Second, ATI created more openings for me to share participants’ own words describing life in the Bronx, the May 2016 intervention, and the intervention’s aftermath, in line with a commitment to “understand the lived experiences of one’s interlocutors, including how they make sense of their worlds” (Simmons and Smith 2019, 343). Due to space constraints, political science articles include sparing interview quotes and often cite interviews without sharing quotes. Qualitative researchers dedicate considerable care and attention to conducting interviews and analyzing interview data. Yet, the incentives of article publishing encourage us to reduce the nuance and detail offered by interview respondents into a simplified data point for causal-process observations (Brady, Collier, and Seawright 2004, 12).

Through annotations, I include lengthy interview quotes—ranging from one to three paragraphs in length—in both the original Spanish and translated into English. Doing so creates space for participants to share first-person accounts in their own words, reducing mediation by the researcher. These interview excerpts include vivid accounts of police violence from homeless citizens who were displaced from the Bronx, descriptions of the overwhelming logistical challenges faced by bureaucrats in charge of homeless shelters in the immediate aftermath of the intervention, and discussions of the decision-making process of top government officials involved in planning the 2016 intervention. These excerpts advance transparency by inviting readers into the richness of my interview data (see also Myrick 2021). Annotations assist in fleshing out the logic and substance of my causal-process observations, thereby enabling readers to evaluate my claims.

Third, I used annotations to incorporate multimedia data sources that are crucial to the study of political communication and policy frames (Gamson et al. 1992; Stone 2012) yet often are excluded from political science publications. When discussing the government’s construction of the human rights frame, I substantiated my claims by linking to tweets posted by

limited space and the pressure of peer review, political scientists face few incentives to present evidence that contradicts their arguments. Yet, because ATI showcases a researcher’s wealth of qualitative data, I felt confident using annotations to discuss evidence that went in the opposite direction of my argument. For example, I demonstrated how the social-policy agencies with the most direct contact with populations in the Bronx were sidelined from planning the 2016 intervention, and I argued that their exclusion signals that the government’s rights framing was strategic in nature. Through annotations, I reinforced this assertion with excerpts from interviews with the policy makers who were involved in planning the intervention and with senior officials in social-policy agencies that were excluded, as well as government responses to freedom-of-information requests. Annotations also yielded opportunities to probe the exception to this claim: that the director of Colombia’s national child-protection agency had a secondary role in planning the intervention. In an annotation, I detailed the limited involvement of the child-protection agency and explained why I nevertheless maintain that the intervention was driven by security actors. I explained how the top figures working on policy to stop sexual exploitation of children had no knowledge of the intervention and viewed the rights framing as a political ploy. As Myrick (2021), Musgrave (2021), and Milonopolous (2021) describe in this symposium, annotations gave me the space and the confidence to adjudicate the contradictions that appear in qualitative evidence and to defend the choices I made in developing my argument. Thus, annotations strengthened the validity of my causal claims while enhancing transparency.

AVOIDING POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF ATI

Although ATI yielded many benefits for my work, it was not without costs, the most immediate being the time and energy required to write the annotations.⁴ Even for a researcher who has excellent field notes and interview transcripts, writing interpretative insights based on these sources takes time. Because I generated data from diverse sources and engaged in triangulation of the data to make claims, I typically had multiple sources of evidence to support each claim. Given

these redundancies, selecting the perfect interview quote, excerpt from policy documents, or section from the transcript of a congressional hearing to support a claim can involve considerable time. Translating extensive quotes from another language into English is another time investment, even for those at or near fluency in the language in which data were gathered.

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Moreover, annotating can enable scholars to put off the more challenging theoretical work that is at the heart of an excellent political science article. I began annotating early in the writing process, before I had figured out my argument; as a result, I dedicated excessive time and energy to developing annotations before I had a clear sense of what needed to be annotated. Doing so not only delayed other important work but also was inefficient: I eventually cut a number of the annotations because they proved not to be central to the papers' objectives. ATI encourages researchers to immerse themselves in evidence, which can inspire new insights. However, not all evidence yields profound insights that merit in-depth interrogation (see also Siewert 2021). Researchers should use ATI in a way that helps them to toggle between evidence and theory while guarding against the temptation to wade aimlessly in their sea of qualitative data.

BALANCING COSTS AND BENEFITS: SOME BEST PRACTICES FOR USING ATI

How can researchers reap the benefits of ATI while limiting its costs? First, maintaining excellent qualitative data-management practices helps researchers to keep track of evidence that can be highlighted in an annotation. Integrating ATI into our scholarly workflow, as Milonopoulos (2021) and Myrick (2021) discuss in this symposium, can reduce the time required for annotations.

Second, researchers should prioritize the annotations that yield the greatest analytical impact. Different research communities are only starting to develop norms about which types

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of annotations yield the most analytic benefit; nevertheless, authors should consider what they hope to accomplish through annotation as a guide in deciding how to prioritize. Given my interest in asking questions about the political causes and impacts of human rights discourses, I focused on annotations that (1) communicated a sense of place for the Bronx of Bogotá; (2) fleshed out the content, logic, and

trajectory of the rights frame; and (3) elaborated the qualitative data that substantiated causal-process observations in my process-tracing analysis. I cut annotations that were not central to these objectives.

One strategy to prioritize the most useful annotations is for authors to self-impose a maximum number of annotations that they will complete. They then can consider whether a potential

annotation is important enough to count toward that limit. Authors should imagine that they are facing the notorious "Reviewer 2" and ask themselves: What claims do I think this reviewer might reasonably challenge? Straightforward claims do not require extensive discussion and support through annotation but complex or controversial claims more often do. Moreover, authors should not use annotations to provide evidence or logic that is essential for a paper's argument. They should assume that only the most engaged readers and reviewers are likely to examine the annotations. In other words, the core text must stand on its own. Any information that is crucial to the argument should be included in the body of the paper.

Third, I recommend that researchers begin annotation after they have mapped out the core argument and structure of the paper being written, after the early drafts. Doing so helps avoid spending undue and, ultimately, unproductive time on nonessential annotations. During the drafting stage, researchers might include placeholder footnotes that indicate opportunities for annotations about particular claims, saving for later the process of developing the precise language to include in them.

CONCLUSION

Scholars who engage in field research immerse ourselves in the worlds that we are studying, dedicating countless hours to interviewing and observing, as well as searching for archival documents. We mull over complexity and contradictions in our minds. When we explain what we are studying to a friend over coffee, we share fascinating stories and insights that we

have learned along the way. Yet, all too often, writing political science articles involves taking fascinating political phenomena and flattening them into a tidy causal narrative that cuts out the messy, contentious, and fundamentally human aspects that make politics interesting.

ATI offers a corrective to this stranglehold. It creates opportunities for researchers to do the diligent work of process tracing

or other forms of causal analysis while also offering insights that otherwise might be cut due to space constraints. Annotations yield particularly fruitful openings for researchers to share qualitative evidence, including extended excerpts of textual sources and multimedia sources that are crucial in political communication. Above all, researchers can use ATI to invite readers into the fascinating political worlds that we dedicate our time, energy, and passion to understanding and explaining. ■

NOTES

1. For an overview of ATI and its uses, see the introduction to this symposium.
2. See Mayka (2021) for the data for this project.
3. For more about the ways that ATI can support nuanced discussions of contradictory evidence, see Gerring (2021) in this symposium.
4. Various contributors to this symposium discuss the time investment required with ATI. Whereas Siewert (2021) shared my experience that ATI can involve considerable time investment, Milonopoulos (2021) explains that annotating demanded more time than he originally thought. Milonopoulos (2021), and Myrick (2021) describe ways that integrating ATI into a researcher's workflow can enhance transparency while reducing the time needed for annotation later.

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