

Bridging Positivist and Interpretative Approaches through Annotation for Transparent Inquiry

Annotation for Transparent Inquiry (ATI) is a tool that opens up 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. In this essay, I describe 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, 259-260; Wedeen 2010), with the hopes of avoiding the flattening that often happens when researchers try to condense arguments about fascinating, vibrant, and puzzling political phenomena into the strictures of the 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, offering 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 employ ATI for a multi-paper research project that examines the causes, content, and impacts of human-rights frames used to justify militarized urban-security interventions in Bogotá, Colombia. 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 the implementation of this 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 engage both positivist and interpretative approaches. On the one hand, I ask 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 the annotations to showcase my rich qualitative data and to provide more room for in-depth description and interpretation. ATI yielded four benefits for this effort to integrate interpretation into my positivist work.

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 the reader's understanding of context, but are not directly 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 first-hand experience in the Bronx. For example, one annotation discusses a rumor raised by a top state official in an interview. This official claimed that in the Bronx, criminal organizations sold drugs mixed with human remains, with the 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, seeing 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 that state is claiming to “rescue.” These discussions deepen the reader’s understanding of the Bronx, challenging simplistic understandings that take at face value 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 its 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 homelessness 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. While these interview excerpts certainly advance transparency, the real benefit is the opportunity to invite the reader into the richness of my interview data (see also AAA, this symposium). Annotations aid me in fleshing out the logic and substance of my causal-process observations, thereby enabling the reader to evaluate my claims.

Third, I used annotations to incorporate multi-media data sources that are crucial to the study of political communication and policy frames (Stone 2012; Gamson et al. 1992), yet are typically excluded from political science publications, which usually rely on text-based evidence. When discussing the government's construction of the human rights frame, I substantiated my claims by linking to tweets made by public officials on the morning of the intervention, images from print media that present the Bronx as a site where schoolgirls are ensnared by criminal organizations, and videos of the intervention. These annotations enhanced the validity of my

assertion that the government sought to develop the rights frame across diverse media. ATI thus offers 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. With limited space and the pressures of peer review, political scientists face few incentives to present evidence that contradicts their arguments. Yet since ATI showcases the 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 demonstrate how the social-policy agencies with the most direct contact with populations in the Bronx were sidelined from planning the 2016 intervention, and argue that their exclusion signals that the government's rights framing was strategic in nature. Through annotations, I back up this assertion with excerpts from interviews with the policymakers 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 gave me space to probe the exception to this claim: the director of Colombia's national child-protection agency had a secondary role in planning the intervention. In an annotation, I detail the limited involvement of the child-protection agency, and explain why I nevertheless maintain that the intervention was driven by security actors. I explain 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. Just as AAA, CCC, and BBB (this symposium) describe, annotations gave me the space and the confidence to adjudicate the inevitable contradictions that appear in qualitative

evidence, and to defend the choices I made in developing my argument, thereby making my work both more transparent and stronger.

Avoiding Potential Pitfalls of ATI

While ATI yielded many benefits for my work, it was not without its costs. The most immediate cost is the time and energy required to write the annotations.² Even with excellent field notes and interview transcripts, writing interpretative insights based on these sources takes time. Since I generated data from diverse sources and engaged in triangulation of data to make claims, I typically had multiple sources of data to support each claim. Given these redundancies, selecting the perfect interview quote, excerpt from a freedom-of-information request, or section from the transcript of a Congressional hearing to back a claim also involves considerable time. Translating those 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.

Moreover, engaging in annotation can enable scholars to postpone the more challenging theoretical work that is at the heart of an excellent political science article in ways that are not analytically helpful. I began annotating very 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 was otherwise inefficient, as a number of these annotations were eventually cut because they proved not to be central to the papers' objectives. ATI encourages the researcher to immerse herself in evidence, which can inspire new insights. Yet, not all evidence yields profound insights that merit in-depth interrogation (see also DDD, this symposium). Researchers should use ATI in a way that helps 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 one's scholarly workflow, as BBB, CCC, and AAA (this symposium) discuss, can reduce the time required for annotations.

Second, researchers should prioritize annotations that yield the greatest analytical impact. While different research communities have not yet begun to develop norms about which kinds of annotations yield the most analytic benefit, 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 annotations is for the author to self-impose a maximum number of annotations that they will complete—for example, somewhere between 30 and 50 annotations. The author can then consider whether a potential annotation is important enough to count towards that limit. The author 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 ones more often do. In addition, authors should not use annotations to provide evidence or logic that is essential for the paper's argument. Authors should assume that only the most engaged readers and reviewers will likely examine the annotations. In other

words, the core text must stand on its own. Any information that is crucial to the thesis should be included in the body of the paper.

Third, I recommend that researchers begin annotation once they have mapped out the core argument and structure of the piece they are writing, after the early stages of drafting, to avoid spending undue, and ultimately unproductive, time annotating. During the drafting stage researchers can include placeholder footnotes indicating opportunities for annotations about a particular claim, saving for later the processes of developing the precise language and translation to be included in the annotation.

Conclusion

Those of us who engage in field research immerse ourselves in the worlds we are studying, dedicating countless hours to interviewing and observing, and hunting for archival documents. We turn over complexity and contradictions in our heads. When we explain what we are studying to a friend over coffee or lunch, 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 in their written products that might otherwise be cut due to space constraints. Annotations offer particularly fruitful openings for researchers to share qualitative evidence, including extended excerpts of textual sources, as well as multi-media 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.

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¹ For an overview of ATI and its uses, see the introductory essay to this symposium.

² Various contributors to this symposium discuss the time investments required with ATI. While DDD shared my experience that ATI can involve considerable time investments, BBB explains that annotating demanded more time than he originally thought. AAA, BBB, and CCC describe ways that integrating ATI into the researcher's workflow can enhance transparency while reducing the time needed for annotation later on.