



Ontology and Epistemology | Interviews

Doing Political Research

Ontology and Epistemology

- What is your ontology? Is there are social reality independent of observation?
- What is your epistemology? Can we observe 'objective' relationships between social phenomena?
- Are you a positivist, interpretist or realist?
- Should we be able to change our research philosophy depending on the research question being asked?

Jones and Tvedten

- How was poverty understood in the quantitative and qualitative studies?
- Can the two perspectives be successfully integrated? Why, or why not?
- What other methods could be used to understand poverty in Mozambique?



Designing an Interview Study

- Choose a research question to investigate a political process or phenomenon and design an interview-based study to answer it.
- Who will you interview?
- Where will the interviews take place?
- How will you conduct the interviews? What questions will you ask?
- How might your positionality affect the answers to your questions?
- How will you analyse the data?

Pearlman

- Who were the interviewees? How were they chosen? How might the method of recruitment have affected the results?
- What effect might the identity of the interviewer have had on the results? Might different interviewers have received different answers to their questions?
- What ontology and epistemology underpinned Pearlman's research project?
- How reliable are the results? How would you improve the study? What other methods could have been used?

Narratives of Fear in Syria

Wendy Pearlman

Scholarship on Syria has traditionally been limited by researchers' difficulty in accessing the reflections of ordinary citizens due to their reluctance to speak about politics. The 2011 revolt opened exciting opportunities by producing an outpouring of new forms of self-expression, as well as encouraging millions to tell their stories for the first time. I explore what we can learn from greater attention to such data, based on thick descriptive analysis of original interviews with 200 Syrian refugees. I find that individuals' narratives coalesce into a collective narrative emphasizing shifts in political fear. Before the uprising, fear was a pillar of the state's coercive authority. Popular demonstrations generated a new experience of fear as a personal burden to be surmounted. As rebellion militated into war, fear became a semi-normalized way of life. Finally, protracted violence has produced nebulous fears of an uncertain future. Study of these testimonials aids understanding of Syria and other cases of destabilized authoritarianism by elucidating lived experiences obscured during a repressive past, providing a fresh window into the construction and evolution of national identity, and demonstrating how the act of narration is an exercise in meaning making within a revolution and itself a revolutionary practice.

A March 2015 United Nations report on the war in Syria found that six percent of the population of 22 million had been killed or injured, some 80 percent lived in poverty, and the majority of children no longer attended school.¹ Satellite images show a country literally "plunged into darkness" with 83 percent of lights gone out,² and some 200 cultural heritage sites damaged or destroyed.³ While the Islamic State (ISIS)'s crimes gain notoriety, the regime of Bashar al-Assad remains responsible for the lion's share of civilian deaths. Escaping atrocities from imposed starvation to indiscriminate barrel

bombs, more than 7.6 million have become internally displaced and 4.1 million externally displaced, as of this writing.⁴ While Europe struggles to resettle a fraction of refugees, the resource-strapped countries on Syria's borders buckle under a deluge whose political implications remain undetermined.

Observing these horrors, dignitaries denounce "senseless" tragedy.⁵ Seeking to make sense of it, political scientists often turn to general concepts such as authoritarian survival and subtypes of civil war. Theories derived from these and other categories elucidate complex conflict

A list of supplementary materials provided by the author precedes the references section.

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