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Identifying Analytic Moves

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Abstract

When we are working through existing literature, the data/materials we collect or produce, and our own writing within the interpretive social sciences or humanities, there is a tendency to privilege two things: overall argument and what we might call information or empirics. However, there is something else we can identify as well, which we have come to understand as *analytic moves*. Analytic moves are tactical decisions about how to make the intrinsic relation between the conceptual and the empiric spark. As moves, they may be needed at a particular conjuncture but are not overall principles that apply everywhere and all the time. We can think of analytic moves as the building blocks of an argument, the smallest gestures we make when making sense of the world. Importantly, it is in these smallest units that the politics of one's work seep in, revealing those areas that we have taken for granted and maybe not paid so much attention to. Watch an associated video of the authors discussing analytic moves at <https://www.emergematrix.org/projects> under "Cabinet of Curious Practices."

Guidelines

Watch a video of the authors discussing analytic moves at <https://www.emergematrix.org/projects> under "Cabinet of Curious Practices."

Before start

When we are working through existing literature, the data/materials we collect or produce, and our own writing within the interpretive social sciences or humanities, there is a tendency to privilege two things: overall argument and something we might call information or empirics.

First, an overall argument is the thrust of an idea, that which can travel as the distinct contribution that an author is making. An argument is built on the combination and fusion of concepts, experiences, illustrations, evidence, and suggestions. At the time an argument is read, it also rests on the assumptions that both the reader and the writer bring to the table.

The second thing that we turn to when conducting research is information or empirics: the material that makes the argument have traction. We can think of that material as the textured worlds and histories that allow us to make sense of the argument itself. This includes information gleaned from a particular time and space. The empirical material connects ideas to a world that is usually distributed, so connections are made both to a particular location and also to different places and times.

When we encounter a text or another kind of material that offers an argument about a world and shows us how that world unfolds, there is something else that we can identify too, beyond the argument and empirics.

That something else is what we have come to understand as analytic moves.

An analytic move is a tactical decision about how to make the intrinsic relation between the conceptual and the empiric spark. It is the moment when you can spot that an author is trying to conjure into existence a distinct sense of something that is happening in the world.

These moves can be small or they can be large. Take the question of what private property is. An author may examine private property by deciding to go into historical records to show how throughout the passage of time property changes in some ways and stays the same in others. Alternatively they might decide to focus on physical markers of boundaries and give an example of property by way of its material expression. Each of these is an analytic move.

Put another way, an analytic move is that juncture when an author decides to take their exploration in a particular direction. For example, an author decides to examine assumptions of liberal subjectivity by analyzing the words in the prayers people say when hoping for a better future, hence undoing the secular assumptions that we tend to accept in relation to liberalism. Or, an author decides to invoke two different forms of exchanging gifts between co-workers (that is, to enact a comparison) to learn something about subjectivity and debt. Or, an analytic move could also be the decision to draw on philosophy to clarify a definition, that is, the decision to draw on abstract ideas to make a clarification or offer a new avenue for thinking.

Just as making a right turn on your bike is in principle the same thing as making a right when driving, which is also in principle the same thing as taking a soft curve towards the right on a boat, analytic moves have a shared character but differ in their specificities. They are all similar to the extent that they are the connective tissue that links argument and empirics, but like turning right on a bike, in a car, or on a boat, they are also all distinct to the situation.



For heuristic purposes, we can think of analytic moves as the building blocks of an argument, the smallest gestures we make when making sense of the world. Importantly, it is in these smallest units that the politics of one's work seep in, revealing those areas that we have taken for granted and perhaps not paid so much attention to. It is in those analytic moves that assumptions about race, class, ethnocentrism, ableism, bourgeois life, and much more become visible.

And finally, analytic moves are moves. That is, they are needed at a particular conjuncture; they are not overall principles that apply everywhere and all the time. They don't determine an argument once and for all. Rather, they are the stepping stones that allow an author to make a point or demonstrate something about the worlds that matter to them.

- 1 When encountering a text or other form of knowledge, experiment with distinguishing argument, evidence, and analytic moves.

Note

Reflection: Which is most difficult to identify? Do your definitions of each expand or change as you identify them more? Do you start to see the structure and flow of a text/knowledge artifact differently?

- 2 Compare the analytic moves you have identified. What do they share? Are they geared primarily to empirics (i.e., as forms of organizing evidence) or are they geared towards associating argument with empirics?
- 3 Create groups of analytic moves (they can correspond to paragraphs; sections of an article, movie, or sound file; chapters; etc.). You can do this at any scale.
- 4 Attempt to describe the qualities espoused by these groups. You can look at the examples below to see how you can name the qualities of analytic moves.

Expected result

These are a few examples of analytic moves that we like, which you can compare to your own collection of analytic moves.

In Max Liboiron's ***Pollution is Colonialism*** (Duke University Press 2021), they "use the case of plastics, increasingly understood as an environmental scourge and something to be annihilated, to refute and refuse the colonial in a good way. That is, [they] try to keep plastics and pollution from being conflated too readily, instead decoupling them so existing and potential relations can come to light that exceed the popular position of 'plastics are bad!'—even though plastics are often bad" (7). Here, the analytic move is **decoupling concepts, ideas, or objects that are easy to conflate** (plastics, pollution, bad), in order to see new relations or processes.

In Janet Roitman's ***Anti-Crisis*** (Duke University Press 2014), she does the inverse in a sense. She **takes two concepts that people might typically see as opposites—credit and debt—and instead collapses them together**. She asks how they are actually the same thing, and from this she is able to argue how despite their different valuations, credit and debt are basically the same thing: credit is "positive" debt, while debit is "negative" credit (in a value sense, not numerical). This allows her to interrogate when and why a positive credit becomes a negative debt or vice versa, which is wrapped up in various political and social events.

In Katherine McKittrick's ***Dear Science and Other Stories*** (Duke University Press 2021), she looks at not just what we know but how we know—the "ideas that make ideas" (15). This entails challenging knowledge production about Blackness and Black liveliness that functions by merely describing Blackness, and instead taking Black liveliness as a *method* for undoing the way we know in the first place. She calls this "method-making": taking Black life as not merely an object but a methodology. In particular, this works against knowledge production that knows Blackness solely through abjection, subjection, and objectification. This is against two analytic habits, the first of "finding marginalized subjects who can then serve as academic data and provide authentic knowledge about oppression" (49) and the second of privileging other certain methodological frames, like Marx. "Both of these approaches objectify the data (insert the figure of the black), by assuming black objecthood is only and primarily an analytical site" (49). **Taking one's object of research as a method for transforming one's broader methodology and epistemology**, i.e. undoing the ways in which we typically know and understand that very object, is a major analytic move—one that here constitutes a foundational disciplinary intervention.

Note

Reflection: How has paying attention to analytic moves changed your reading/writing/teaching practices?