

On Interpretivist Inference

Katherine Cramer begins her celebrated book *The Politics of Resentment* with the arresting story of her brother Tom being snubbed at a gas station on the basis of his left-wing bumper sticker (2-3). It's the sort of story that just about any editor would swoon over, and it inevitably featured in her op-eds promoting the book. There's only one problem – it's completely unrepresentative of Cramer's actual research. Cramer began by studying class-based resentment, but changed her focus to the politics of place-based resentment in rural areas. The phenomenon of "rural consciousness" that she identifies is the result of an ethnographic, interpretivist account of hundreds of meetings with groups across the state of Wisconsin. It is worth noting that in the account we read, she never once experienced the type of immediate rejection that characterized her story about Tom. I think this trivial detail is symptomatic of a larger problem with Cramer's approach. This essay will argue that although her ethnographic work is extremely important and worthy of publication in full, her presentation and interpretation of her findings are not as careful as they could be.¹ It will also explore the theoretical limits of legitimate inference on the basis of interpretivist accounts.

Cramer is quite clear that she is seeking an interpretivist understanding, focused on "how people understand their world" (35). She tells us that her job as a political ethnographer "is to describe what I observed in enough detail that you, the reader, can judge my observations for yourself. I want to show you how I arrived at my conclusions, not just tell you what they are" (26). Cramer sampled using a stratified purposeful approach (29). It is not until much later in the book that we learn that this sampling strategy was selected on the basis of an entirely different research question, namely the content of public opinion regarding the University of Wisconsin – Madison (111). Cramer "tried to take advantage of the way my presence altered the conversations, rather than fool myself into thinking I could somehow present myself as somebody who appeared neutral on every dimension" (32). This makes sense.

¹ Cramer also concludes that "the Wisconsin I know now is something different, something divided" (207). This is not particularly evident in her ethnography – at least, not in reactions by rural people to an avatar of the "other side" like Cramer.

However, in the very next sentence, she asserts that “rural consciousness was not an artifact of my presence” (32). I wondered how she would know this. Cramer tells us that she made a point to “think about the evidence I would need to see in order to validate my conclusions and convince myself and others how I know what I say I know, and then I make plans to go and get this evidence” (42-43). Pursuant to this objective, Cramer added groups as her study progressed, making these additions on a theoretical basis to pursue causal conjectures (43). She never asks what evidence might invalidate her conclusions. Under what circumstances should we expect rural consciousness to arise, and under what circumstances should we expect it to lead to a politics of resentment? I remain unsure.

I see no reason that rural consciousness might not simply be an instance of the generic resentment felt by out-groups in a democratic polity.² Cramer tells us that rural consciousness is concerned with perceptions of power, perceptions of values and lifestyles, and preferences regarding resource distribution (55). These factors seem uncomfortably generic. Cramer is rather vague about what actually constitutes a rural community, but she does admit to occasionally using the term to characterize the entire state of Wisconsin outside of Milwaukee and Madison (56). The frustrations that she instances as examples of rural consciousness take the form of tax dollars flowing into the state capital and unaccountable decisions flowing out. This also sounds very general. Wisconsin, like 31 other US states, determines local government authority on the basis of Dillon’s Rule, which establishes complete state preeminence over local government (Coester 2004). Localities in such jurisdictions are exceedingly circumscribed, lacking the power to appoint their own officials or appropriate their own budgets. All power (and funding) originates with the state legislature, and is granted to localities in limited and revocable measures. The rural resentment towards Madison that Cramer reports appear to me to be a species of the generic resentment felt in all Dillon’s Rule states – at least I see no reason why this should

² “We can’t get our fair share of the benefits, *and we never will be able to* because there aren’t a lot of people like us.” Resentment seems to require the second element as well as the first.

not be so.³ The discussions of unaccountable regulatory overreach (77, 155) would not look out of place if one replaced Wisconsin with Great Britain and Madison with Brussels.

Cramer notes that “[t]hese perceptions of injustice burned so brightly because they carried perceptions of blame” (79). Cramer’s Chapter 4 undermines any sound factual basis for the content of the claims she observed in her study of rural consciousness (e.g. that rural areas are systematically underinvested in by the state), and she concludes the chapter by asserting that rural people “teach these things to each other” (110). She delicately avoids the question of the origins of the false beliefs, but she alludes to “top-down and bottom-up processes operating simultaneously” (219). For example, one of the things people are teaching to each other, apparently, is the idea that local public employees (like schoolteachers) were outsiders, “even if they had grown up just a few towns away” (131). This conscious “othering” of state employees is a routine right-wing media talking point. By framing it as the product of rural consciousness, we overdignify it.⁴

I want to reiterate that Cramer’s ethnographic findings are first-rate. My copy of Cramer 2016 is festooned with notes and flags, but they’re mainly on the transcripts. I’m deeply interested in what her respondents said, and I’ve already had ideas for interesting follow-up research. I’m also sympathetic to some of her conclusions – I too think that support for small government is more about identity than principle. But it seems problematic to base this conclusion on selected anecdotes without a sense of how representative they are of the study findings. Cramer occasionally makes statements like “this topic came up in 18 of my 27 groups”. More of this sort of thing would have helped enormously – details concerning how widespread a particular perspective was *within the findings of her own study* was generally lacking.

³ I have heard precisely the same sentiment with respect to Richmond in my home of Charlottesville – a small city. Virginia follows Dillon’s Rule.

⁴ Similarly, Cramer writes of the perception that “wherever their hard-earned money was going, it was not coming to them. It seemed instead to be going, in part, to bloated government programs and overpaid and underworked public employees” (148). She never considers the source of this perception, but it seems unlikely that it emerges from personal experience. Two more examples – Cramer heard “very little discussion of banks or financiers, before or after the crisis” (173), and “[a] common complaint was that government did not run more like a business” (174). I smell a rat.

I think one of Cramer's most important findings is that her subjects did not talk about themselves in general terms like "working class" or "rural" but rather using more discrete concepts like "rural Wisconsin person" (218, note 8). This points to an intriguing source of particularism in an otherwise generic resentment narrative. However, without her full data it is difficult to know how widespread this perception truly is.

Cramer writes that she tried to provide results that were "sufficiently contextualized so that the interpretations are embedded in, rather than abstracted from, the settings of the actors studied" (214, quoting Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Her own interpretations seem to range a bit farther than this. It's no good insisting that you're contextualizing your interpretation if you blog on Monkey Cage about how the 2016 election can be explained by a yawning urban-rural divide (Cramer 2016b). Generalizations on the basis of ethnography should be subjected to the same rigorous standards as other generalizations. Cramer escapes from these high standards by asserting that she isn't making any generalizations or causal claims. Her work subsequently drew substantial interest on the basis of its plausible generalizability. Isn't the role of a responsible social scientist to stand athwart this process yelling "Stop!"?

More generally, what can we learn from this type of interpretivist exercise? Must it be simply a forerunner of more detailed causal studies of the same populations? The nature of a collective frame suggests a different answer. Such frames are social and interpersonal (Tarrow 2011). Studying these social constructs requires accepting the reality of group-level phenomena not reducible to individual psychology. If a researcher enters into the social world of frame participants, she can study at first hand the causal processes that lead to the formation of individual opinions. Crucially, these group-level causal processes are invisible to the agents they act upon, but become apparent to a researcher because they are likely to jar violently against prior understandings of the world. Such group-level phenomena cannot be observed by survey instruments (their individual level *effects* can be observed in this way, but not the

phenomena themselves). Human beings police the boundaries of social norms by defining the space of possible moral emotions (Hutcherson and Gross 2011). Short of panopticon-style monitoring, the best way for a researcher to understand a collective frame is to experience its effects firsthand and to observe their impact on others. While one-on-one interviews might yield individual opinions, the scope of acceptable opinions within a reference group is defined by the collective frame, and that frame can only be studied in group contexts. I'm less sure of this next part, but it seems to me that participation in the frame by the researcher should entail a kind of hypothetical sympathy with the group, because the logic of the frame will only make sense to a willing participant. This isn't necessarily to call for a hyper-individuated, subjective style of inquiry (gonzo political science?), but rather to say that objectivity concerns seem misplaced when the object of understanding is itself conditional and intersubjective.

I believe the politics of resentment exists. I am less sure about rural consciousness as Cramer defines it. It seems clear that a toxic stew of identity and victimhood can lead to an entrenched and seething resentment towards authority. I do not know what we gain analytically by presenting this resentment as rural consciousness, unless the gain is that it comes with a bow on top for commentators seeking to explain the 2016 election.⁵ Simply put, rural consciousness does not seem to have explicitly rural antecedents.⁶ Finally, Cramer's dilemma regarding generalization speaks to a larger worry with interpretive work – that it will be generalized whether its authors wish it to be or not.

⁵ Specifically, the migration of the rural upper Midwest to the Republican party.

⁶ One of the only findings that gives me pause on this point is the widespread rural perception of the inevitability of ill fortune (138), but even this seems to be a form of learned helplessness common among out-groups.

References

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