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Interpretive process tracing? How PT can become amenable to interpretive research

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Process tracing (PT) is a popular method that is increasingly applied in policy studies, including foreign policy analysis (FPA). However, while policy research and FPA have strong interpretivist strands, PT has been predominantly developed and applied within a regularity-oriented, broadly positivist framework. This article advances an analyticist approach to PT for policy research. Pivoting around ideal typification, it reconceptualizes mechanisms as ideal types and distinguishes between mechanisms proper, their concrete instantiations, and the processes they concatenate into. This reconceptualization enables researchers to treat knowledge as socially constructed, to produce meaning-sensitive and contextually rich case descriptions while retaining the possibility of drawing analytically general and portable conclusions, and to advance a constitutive understanding of causation grounded in locally embedded processes. Although not inherently interpretive, this reconceptualization makes PT amenable to interpretive research in ways the regularity-oriented approach is not. The advantages of this approach are shown through a reinterpretation of a published FPA study by Eun A. Jo: 'Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations'. This example demonstrates the added value of analyticist PT highlighting the sometimes nuanced differences in what regularity-oriented and analyticist approaches to PT afford.

Keywords interpretivism • process tracing • mechanisms as ideal types • analyticist approach • constitutive causality • policy research • foreign policy analysis

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Introduction

Process tracing (PT) is a popular method. Largely developed in political science, it is well suited for policy research and foreign policy analysis (FPA). However, while policy research and FPA have strong interpretivist strands, PT has been predominantly developed and applied within a regularity-oriented, broadly positivist framework. In this article, I advance an analyticist approach to PT for policy research and argue this approach is amenable to interpretive epistemologies, constructivist ontologies, and reflexive research practices in ways the regularity-oriented approach is not.

To briefly state the problem up-front, many PT methodologists seem to make three (implicit) assumptions that throw up hurdles for interpretive research. First, albeit at times ‘unobservable’, they tend to assume that mechanisms are real features of the empirical world (for example, [George and Bennett, 2005](#): 137; [Beach and Pedersen, 2019](#): 52). With this assumption they borrow from philosophers of science who, often in reference to natural processes and phenomena, posit mechanisms as part of ‘the furniture of the real world’ or as having a ‘spatiotemporal locality’ ([Bunge, 1997](#): 414; [Machamer et al, 2000](#): 5; see also: [Glennan, 1996](#): 64; [Williamson, 2011](#): 421). Second, most introductions to PT assume that researchers can study empirical phenomena more or less objectively. Although not stated in these terms, it is at least notable that treatments of the method tend to not problematize a researcher’s access to the empirical world. Third, in this literature mechanisms are predominantly discussed as underlying regular associations ([Gerring, 2004](#): 348; [Hall, 2006](#): 27–8; [Collier, 2011](#): 824; [Goertz and Mahoney, 2012](#): 101; [Bennett and Checkel, 2015](#): 7; [Beach and Rohlfing, 2018](#): 5). Starting from the assumption that there are populations of ‘causally homogenous’ cases, methodologist often assume that if a mechanism is found to function in one case under certain conditions, it should function similarly in other cases that exhibit those same conditions ([Mahoney, 2015](#): 205; [Beach and Pedersen, 2018](#): 838).

The hurdles these assumptions throw up are not easily overcome. Indeed, some of the central characteristics of the regularity-oriented approach sit at best uneasily with the interests and needs of interpretive researchers. However, rather than abandoning PT altogether, this article aims to adapt the method in ways that make it amenable to interpretive research.

More concretely, I further develop an analyticist approach to PT that pivots around ideal typification ([Jackson, 2016](#)). Following this approach, I suggest reconceptualizing mechanisms as ideal types ([Hedström and Swedberg, 1998](#); [McAdam et al, 2004](#); [Jackson, 2006](#); [Falleti and Lynch, 2009](#); [Pouliot, 2015](#); [Guzzini, 2017](#); [Robinson, 2017](#)) and, as suggested in earlier work, distinguishing between the mechanisms proper, their concrete instantiations, and the processes they concatenate into ([van Meegdenburg, 2023](#)). This reconceptualization enables researchers – whether interested in economic, education, health, welfare or foreign policy processes – to posit knowledge as socially constructed, offer meaning-sensitive and contextually rich case descriptions, and put forward a constitutive understanding of causation grounded in locally embedded processes. However, these possibilities should be regarded as affordances of the approach. Analyticist PT is not inherently interpretive: whether any given PT study is an interpretive PT depends not on the method and what it affords, but on the methodological commitments and research practices researchers bring to it.¹

To introduce analyticist PT both theoretically and practically, this article takes the following four steps. First, I briefly introduce regularity-oriented PT by discussing a well-developed study from [Olga Löblová \(2018\)](#). This discussion allows me to review the most important premises of the regularity-oriented approach and provides a good example for comparisons throughout the article. Second, I discuss the main assumptions interpretive (policy) research makes and how these assumptions and their practical implications suggest that interpretive researchers may be better off following the analyticist approach developed in this article. Third, I explain what it means to reconceptualize mechanisms as ideal types and how distinguishing between mechanisms proper, concrete instantiations, and processes makes PT amenable to interpretive research. Fourth, to offer an empirical example, I apply this understanding

to a published FPA study by Eun A. Jo: 'Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations' (2022). That is, I reinterpret her paper through the analyticist framework and demonstrate the added value of the approach. The discussion then compares Löblová's and Jo's approaches to highlight the sometimes nuanced differences in what the two approaches to PT afford.

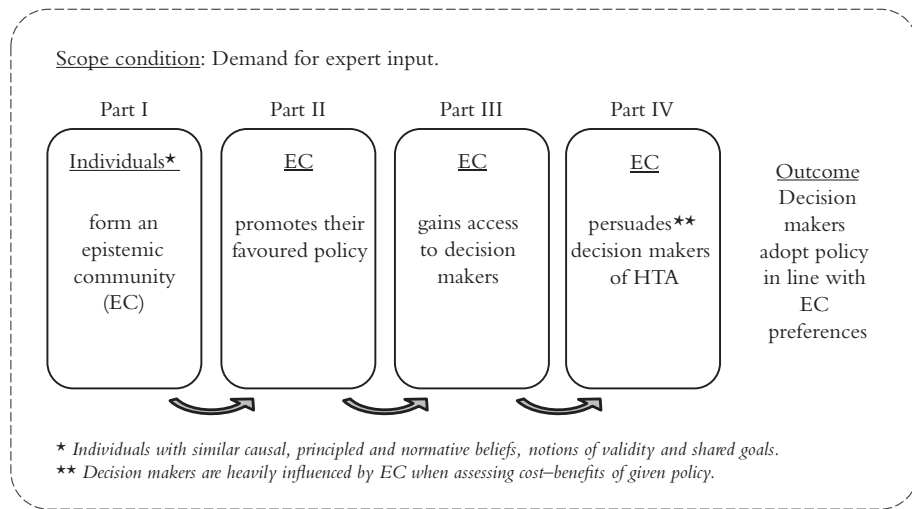
Policy processes and the regularity-oriented approach to PT

Much contemporary qualitative work, including PT, is implicitly positivist. As Patrick Jackson argued: 'the "quantitative"/"qualitative" divide [is] a distinction without a difference – a distinction of *method* without a difference of *methodology*' (2016: 77; emphasis in original). Many qualitative scholars would assume there is an actually existing reality out there that we can study fairly objectively. Moreover, although many a PT methodologist would disagree with the idea that regularities are the best way to study causation, most assume that causation brings forth regularities (for example, Gerring, 2004: 348; George and Bennett, 2005: 207; Hall, 2006: 27–8; Collier, 2011: 824; Goertz and Mahoney, 2012: 101; Bennett and Checkel, 2015: 7). For instance, combining these assumptions Beach and Pedersen argue that we can assess the 'actual empirical observations we find in a case' to study a mechanism that is expected to work 'within a bounded population of causally similar cases' (2019: 4, 6). Because of the prominence of the regularity assumption, I will refer to PT following these assumptions as the regularity-oriented approach to PT.

What do these assumptions mean for PT in practice? To answer this question, I briefly introduce a theory-testing PT study following this approach: Löblová (2018). I discuss Löblová's work not to unduly critique her from a perspective she does not take but highlight the practical implications of the approach and for comparisons with the analyticist approach introduced hereafter.

Löblová studies the role and success of epistemic communities (ECs) in policy making. It is a comparative study and she looks at the (non-)establishment of health technology assessment (HTA) agencies in Poland and the Czech Republic. The Polish case is the positive case. Here the EC was able to persuade the relevant decision makers to establish an HTA. The Czech case is a negative case. Through this negative case, Löblová shows that sustained demand is a necessary condition and that when demand falters the mechanism fails. Figure 1 presents her mechanism schematically.

Why is this a good example of the regularity-oriented approach to PT? First, as is common in qualitative research (Yanow, 2014: 144; Smith Ochoa, 2026), Löblová builds her case primarily on interviews. However, she treats the interviews as objective and factual. Neither are the interviews presented as the interviewees' reflections on the process nor is her retelling of the interviewees' stories presented as an interpretation or representation of those interpretations – the famous double hermeneutic. Second, Löblová's mechanism is presented as generalizable. It should work 'as theorized' (Beach and Pedersen, 2019: 10) in all cases where the relevant scope condition – demand for expert input – is present and the trigger occurs. She recognizes that 'sources of demand for expertise are multiple' (Löblová, 2018: 177), but as long as that demand exists she expects that individuals will form an EC and gain access, and that their preferences will be adopted. This implicit determinism is clearest in Part IV in Figure 1. In this step, it is assumed that decision makers will be persuaded by the EC regardless of the dispositions and understandings of, and the relations between, the actors involved.

Figure 1: Epistemic community influence

Source: Based on Löblövá (2018: 176).

Following the regularity-oriented approach, Löblövá's arguments are logically correct and coherent: that is not the point of this discussion. Moreover, the addition of the mechanism over the mere conjunction or correlation is certainly valuable. PT opens the 'black box of causality' and adds significantly to our understanding of the world (Trampusch and Palier, 2016).

However, although the assumption of the objectivity of evidence is changeable, other aspects of this approach are not so easily amenable to interpretive research. On the one hand, many philosophers of science often cited by methodologists working in this approach would hold mechanisms to be 'physically real' (Glennan, 1996: 52; Williamson, 2011: 421). As noted, they posit mechanisms as having a 'spatiotemporal locality' (Machamer et al, 2000: 5) or argue they are 'not pieces of reasoning but pieces of the furniture of the real world' (Bunge, 1997: 414). PT methodologists tend to add to that the critical realist position that mechanisms may be 'ultimately unobservable' because they contain cognitive, relational or macro-level elements (George and Bennett, 2005: 137; Beach and Pedersen, 2019: 52). However, they do not substantially deviate from that ontological position (see also Pouliot (2007: 363, 373) for this critique). On the other hand, much PT works with a rather deterministic understanding of causation. This understanding of causation underpins the regularity assumption and diminishes the space for agency and contingency central in interpretive research (Checkel, 2006: 363; Jackson, 2006: 33; van Meegdenburg, 2023: 408). As Beach and Pedersen discuss, if an agent 'chooses not to engage in the activities' then the mechanism 'breaks down' (2019: 17–18). I will come back to these points later in this article.

Interpretive research and analyticist PT

Explaining in detail the premises of interpretive research lies outside the bounds of this article. However, this section discusses three basic assumptions that most interpretive research makes and briefly addresses their practical implications. It is these assumptions

and their implications that makes that interpretive researchers are better off following the analyticist approach to PT developed in this article. This discussion is succinct and assumes familiarity with most concepts and ideas.

Main assumptions and their implications

First, interpretive research starts from the assumption that human knowledge of the world – both our knowledge of the physical world and our knowledge of the social world – is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 13; see also; Guzzini, 2000: 159; Pouliot, 2007: 362). Knowledge does not exist independently from human agents and is the result of ongoing social processes of production and revision that are afforded by, and largely mediated through, language. This epistemological assumption affects how we understand the everyday knowledge of political actors and policy makers – the people whose interpretations and constructions we tend to study – as well as how we understand scientific knowledge itself. As Giddens stated, researchers deal ‘with a universe which is already constituted within frames of meaning by social actors themselves’ and they ‘reinterpret those meanings’ within their own ‘theoretical schemes’ (1993: 170). In other words, social scientists often offer interpretations of interpretations – a double hermeneutic (Guzzini, 2000: 160; Pouliot, 2007: 365; Jackson, 2014: 270).

Second, interpretive research rests on a constructivist ontology that treats the social world as socially constructed. Through language and practices people create (and recreate) the intersubjective meanings that are continuously stabilized as ‘social facts’ (Ruggie, 1998: 856). Yet, while socially constructed, these social facts are not epiphenomenal. As intersubjective meanings articulated in shared concepts and enacted as norms, institutional arrangements and social relations, they generally confront actors as real and durable features of their (social) reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 35). Interpretive research thus takes social reality to be both socially contingent and practically consequential.

Third, interpretive research assumes that people engage in behaviour that is situationally meaningful to them (Guzzini, 2000: 161; Jackson, 2014: 270). Actors act based on their (shared) understandings of situations and their expectations about the kinds of behaviour that would be feasible, desirable or effective. This understanding of behaviour follows Anthony Giddens, who described human action as motivated, rationalized and situationally reflexive (1984: 3–6).

From these assumptions, four things follow more or less logically. First, given the assumption that knowledge and social reality are socially constructed, it follows that people can hold (slightly) different understandings of ‘reality’. In making sense of the world, people and social groups (creatively) draw on historically contingent and potentially divergent ‘reservoirs of lessons and scripts’ (Guzzini, 2012: 49; see also: Laffey and Weldes, 1997: 209; Jackson, 2014: 270). They may thus work with different meanings and concepts and interpret actors, objects and events differently.

Second, given the interpretive epistemology, it also follows that researchers recognize that the theories they work with are themselves social constructs and that their case studies are necessarily interpretive simplifications of complex realities. This also invites ‘reflexivity’ as a valued research practice underscoring, as

Jessica Soedirgo and Aarie Glas put it, that ‘we gain knowledge about the world only through our positionality’ (2020: 528; see also: [Durnová, 2022: 49](#); [Small and McCrory Calarco, 2022: 119](#)).

Third, given the understanding of behaviour as situationally meaningful, it follows that human behaviour is taken to be non-deterministic. Human engagement with their physical and social worlds can bring forth regularities in behaviour – take, for example, Pouliot’s discussion of practices as ‘repeated and patterned’ (2015: 240) – but it does not have to. Working with their own interpretations and understandings, people have both the ‘capability to “go on” with the routines of social life’ and the ‘capability to “make a difference” to a preexisting state of affairs or course of events’ (Giddens, 1984: 4, 14). This notion that people ‘could ... have acted differently’ (Giddens, 1984: 9) is central to the concept of agency. As Patrick Jackson elaborated, agency implies ‘creativity and contingency: the creativity of actors in assembling particular cultural resources in a specific way, and the contingency of the patterns that are thus produced’ (Jackson, 2014: 270).

Fourth, taking all of this together, it follows that empirical work should take the understandings and constructions of the actors themselves as its analytical starting point. ‘The focus [should be] on what it is that social agents, as opposed to analysts, take to be real’ (Pouliot, 2007: 364; see also [Geertz, 1973: 316](#)). Hence, in studying and understanding action, meaning is primary. We should aim to understand how actors themselves make sense of the situations in which they act.

Adapting PT

How, then, can we adapt PT such that it is open to interpretive epistemologies, constructivist ontologies, and reflexive research practices? Because the relevance of analyticist PT for interpretive research only becomes clear once the approach itself is introduced, I limit this discussion to its core commitment.

The term ‘analyticist’ comes from Patrick Jackson.² Following Jackson, analyticism pivots around ideal typification and links abstract explanation to contextually embedded empirical inquiry. In relation to PT, ideal typification would regard the mechanisms. That is, analyticist PT would reconceptualize mechanisms as *ideal types* – abstract constructions that function as useful aids, or heuristics, to research (Jackson, 2016: 159; [van Meegdenburg, 2023: 408–9](#)). This reconceptualization comes with four affordances that will prove central to opening PT to interpretive inquiry. First, reconceptualizing mechanisms as ideal types acknowledges that our theories are abstractions and social constructs. Second, ideal typification implies that actual cases are indeterminate and always contextually embedded. Third, it balances research by combining ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973: 14) with ‘analytical generality’ (Pouliot, 2015: 250) and ‘portability’ of the findings (Falleti and Lynch, 2009: 1147). And fourth, it understands causation as locally embedded and based in complex concatenations (McAdam et al, 2004: 120; Jackson, 2014: 279; Pouliot, 2015: 239).

In what follows, I first introduce the analyticist approach to PT reconceptualizing mechanisms as ideal types. Thereafter, I come back to the question of why this approach to PT is amenable to interpretivist needs in ways that the regularity-oriented approach is not.

Analyticist PT

In this section I focus on the practical affordances of analyticist PT reconceptualizing mechanisms as ideal types. I start with defining and distinguishing between mechanisms, their concrete instantiations, and processes as concatenations of instantiations. Thereafter I detail how this understanding creates space for agency and contingency and reflect on ‘portability’ as an alternative to generalization. I close with a discussion of the amenability of analyticist PT to interpretive research.

Mechanisms, instantiations and processes

First, a *mechanism* is an ideal typical, analytical construct that defines, in abstract terms, how a given set-up or entity transfers motion in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations (adapted from [McAdam et al, 2004: 24](#)). As ideal types, mechanisms are simplifications of complex realities that capture the essence of social phenomena ([Weber, 2014: 124–25](#); [Jackson, 2016: 169–70](#)).

Importantly, understanding mechanisms as ideal types means they *are* social constructs ([Robinson, 2017: 508](#); [van Meegdenburg, 2023: 409](#)). They are not ‘pieces of the furniture of the real world’, they are interpretations and abstractions that are produced and reproduced by researchers. Following Weber, this means that mechanisms do not have a ‘truth value’. As our ‘conceptual tools’ ([Weber, 2014: 129](#)) they are not meant to be accurate descriptions of reality, they are meant to be useful aids ‘that allow empirical reality to be *ordered intellectually* in a valid manner’ ([Weber, 2014: 137](#), emphasis in original; see also: [Jackson, 2014: 271](#); [Pouliot, 2015: 252](#)). An important aspect of mechanisms as ideal types is thus that they allow us to discuss particular instantiations as instances of some thing, process, or logic ([Hedström and Swedberg, 1998: 13](#); [McAdam et al, 2004: 24](#); [Pouliot, 2007: 374](#); [Norman, 2015: 7](#); [Robinson, 2017: 508](#)). They make sequences, actions and behaviours intelligible as a particular type of sequence, action or behaviour.

Ideal types are derived through abstraction ([Pouliot, 2015: 251–2](#); [van Meegdenburg, 2023: 409](#)). In relation to abstraction [Kaas et al \(2025: 637\)](#) – although their account of ‘social process tracing’ stays much closer to the regularity-oriented approach – touch upon the idea of ‘particularizing’ a mechanism. This is a useful way to think of abstraction as it proposes the induced mechanisms are *de-particularized* renditions. From this point onwards, I will refer to the de-particularized ideal type as the *mechanism proper*: the mechanism as undone of any idiosyncratic, case-specific aspects that may have shaped its instantiations.

Second, *concrete instantiations are instances of the mechanism in practice*. Discussing concrete instantiations we can use proper nouns; we can point to specific people, movements, things and places. And while the mechanisms proper are de-particularized, concrete instantiations are always ‘thickly’ embedded in their particular context.

A short illustration may be helpful here. In relation to Löblová’s research, analyticist PT would view ‘persuasion’ not as a step in a mechanism, but as a mechanism proper. As a mechanism proper, persuasion could be to try and ‘make someone do or believe something by giving them a good reason to do [or believe] it’.³ This is clearly a mechanism of social interaction. At the same time, any concrete instantiation would involve concrete actors persuading and being persuaded of concrete substances in

concrete contexts. In Löblová's case this regards ECs persuading concrete decision makers of a concrete substantive suggestion: establishing an HTA. But persuading is ubiquitous. For instance, a group of university students and staff can try to persuade the governing body of their university of the just and justified nature of the protests against Israel's war on Gaza. The substance and outcome of this latter instantiation of persuasion would be radically different, but the mechanism of persuading is the same (McAdam et al, 2004: 27; van Meegdenburg, 2023: 410).

Importantly, the difference between mechanisms proper as abstract ideal types on the one hand, and their concrete instantiations on the other, makes that the mechanisms can be conceptualized as 'multifinal' (Guzzini, 2017: 432) and 'indeterminate' (Falleti and Lynch, 2009: 1151). The same mechanism can bring about different outcomes. I will come back to this.

Lastly, *processes are concatenations – a coming together and interacting – of instantiations of mechanisms in generally unique settings and ways* (McAdam et al, 2004: 24). Different from Nullmeier and Kuhlmann who refer to 'elementary mechanisms' that combine into 'complex mechanisms' (2022: 18), I thus posit processes as *mechanism complexes*. Processes can be long, short and anything in between but the fact that they are a coming together of mechanisms in case-specific settings and ways means they are, just like the mechanisms themselves, indeterminate. We may be able to identify how a given concatenation produced an outcome *ex post*, but we cannot know *ex ante* which mechanisms will instantiate nor how they will interact. Processes, moreover, are not linear and only sequential. Concrete instantiations can play out in parallel and sequence, and we would assume that what happens as part of one instantiation shapes what (can) happen as part of others (van Meegdenburg, 2023: 411).

Agency and contingency

If human behaviour is understood to be non-deterministic, then "[p]reserving agency" ... means generating accounts that leave room for the indeterminacy, creativity, and contingency of social action' (Jackson, 2014: 271). How does analyticist PT afford space for agency and contingency? Agency, and other case-specific contingencies and idiosyncrasies, are theoretically afforded by the fact that both mechanisms and processes are conceptualized as indeterminate. Key in this affordance is the distinction between processes, concrete instantiations and mechanisms proper. To illustrate, I will continue the hypothetical example of persuasion in relation to the campus protests.

Assume students and staff of a university started an encampment on campus to call on their university to cut ties with Israeli institutions and help stop the genocide. Assume further, that the university governing body wanted to break up the protest. Not being very committed to the cause and unwilling to disgruntle the mayor who was up for re-election the next month and wanted to look 'tough', the board was considering allowing police to remove the encampment. Students and staff tried to persuade the board, but their attempt failed.

This is a *process* in which persuasion played a role. Students and staff tried to make the board do something by giving the board members good reasons to do it. They may have not been successful, but that does not change that persuasion as *mechanism proper* – as ideal type – provides a useful heuristic to study this *concrete instantiation*. The characteristic motions of persuasion (the ideal typical activities the entities

engaged in) should be discernible, and the understanding of the mechanism can guide and focus the research. At the same time, this shows persuasion as a mechanism is multifinal. Persuasion can succeed and fail; and it can be part of a process that leads to the establishment of an HTA and it can be part of a process that leads to the removal of protestors from a university campus. Yet, while the concrete ‘outcome[s] are] significantly different’, the ‘mechanism is essentially the same’ (McAdam et al, 2004: 27).

Studying a *concrete instantiation* of persuasion, a researcher can zoom in on the case-specific settings, relations, understandings and tactics, and offer a true ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973: 14–15). At the same time, focusing on the *process* as a whole, and allowing case-specific idiosyncrasies to come in, the study would highlight how the upcoming elections and the mayor’s desire to look ‘tough’ led them to put pressure on the university board. Such a case-specific contingency does not break down the mechanism of persuasion. Instead, it shapes the context in which it plays out and, in this case, the overall outcome. In fact, for the description of the *process* as a whole, all such causally productive idiosyncrasies should be part of the causal story. There are no methodological reasons to be ‘parsimonious’ in the case descriptions. Parsimony is only relevant in relation to the delineation of the mechanisms proper.

In short, agency and contingency are afforded space in the thick descriptions of the concrete instantiations and overall processes. They do not break down a mechanism, instead they shape its instantiations.

Portability and lessons learned

The idea of thick case descriptions brings forth an important question: what, if any, more general lessons can we learn from our case studies? Unless researchers are satisfied by offering idiosyncratic case descriptions, analyticist PT needs a way to draw conclusions that can ‘travel’ across ‘varying historical settings’ (McAdam et al, 2004: 24). Fortunately, ideal typification offers such a way. The mechanism proper as ideal typical abstraction has what Pouliot called ‘analytical generality’ or what Falleti and Lynch refer to as ‘portability’ (2009: 1147). Considering the connotation of being easily transported, I adopt Falleti and Lynch’s term.

Portability relates to generalizability but derives more general conclusions through abstraction and transposition. What is portable are the abstract, theoretical and typical motions that describe the mechanisms proper (Pouliot, 2015: 251; Guzzini, 2017: 434; van Meegdenburg, 2023: 412). Persuasion, as an analytically general, de-particularized, theoretical construct, is ubiquitous. Its ideal typical motions are likely to have co-shaped a great many outcomes and it is our knowledge of the mechanism proper that allows us to recognize an instance of persuasion when we see one. At the same time, it is through the study of concrete, contextually embedded instantiations that we learn about the mechanisms proper.

Related to this, it is good to note that theory is not static. As scholarly constructs, mechanisms proper, like all ideal typical constructions, are ‘transitory’ (Weber, 2014: 133). By using our understanding of a given mechanism to make intelligible a process or event, and by reflecting on what that case study teaches us about the workings of the mechanism, we keep it alive. Mechanisms proper, when being used, are likely to be continuously refined.

Interpretive PT?

As noted, analyticist PT is not inherently interpretive. However, it is amenable to the needs of interpretive research in ways the regularity-oriented approach is not. Now that the method is introduced, I can specify why this is the case.

Interpretive research starts from an interpretive epistemology (assuming *knowledge* is socially constructed) combined with a constructivist ontology (assuming the *social world* is socially constructed). Moreover, interpretive research is generally interested in understanding how locally established understandings and case-specific interpretations and contingencies constituted a given outcome. At the same time, interpretive research would be aware that both the thick description of the case and the more abstract lessons drawn are themselves selective (re)descriptions and, in relation to that, researchers may practise reflexivity.

Analyticist PT affords space to all of these assumptions, focuses and practices. First, *mechanisms proper*, as ideal types, are explicitly reconceptualized as (scholarly) constructs and as indeterminate and multifinal. Second, *concrete instantiations* can be understood as locally embedded. That means instantiations of mechanisms can be studied as constituted by, and constituting, local meanings and their discussion can be presented in the form of a 'thick description'. Third, a *process* can be understood and described as a complex coming together of a multitude of mechanisms and other relevant case-specific contingencies including situational interpretations and contextual opportunities and constraints. Analyticist PT is thus open to a 'constitutive' understanding of causation positing it as based in local, complex and case-specific concatenations. Lastly, reflexive practices can be incorporated considering they do not conflict with any of the affordances.

Important, though, is to keep in mind that any given PT is only an interpretive PT when the researcher commits to an interpretive methodology and translates that commitment into their research practice. As such, while analyticist PT is amenable to the assumptions and practices, a project adopting the approach is not automatically interpretive.

Analyticist PT in practice

What could analyticist PT look like in practice? In what follows I conduct a close reading and in-depth discussion of a published PT study translating and interpreting it in the terms and concepts introduced in this article. For this exercise, and with her consent, I work with Eun A. Jo's paper on 'Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations' (2022). I chose Jo's work because she studies collective memory as social construction through tracing the mechanisms of mnemonic contestation as social activities. However, having to invent the wheel herself, her mechanisms are not as systematically developed as they could be, and the way she derives more general insights remains underspecified.

I do like to stress that this is an empirical illustration of analyticist PT. That is, I do not discuss Jo's philosophical starting points nor assess whether her research practices align with interpretive practices. Instead, I focus the discussion on the most important practical affordances of the method: how the distinction between mechanisms proper, concrete instantiations, and processes can work out in practice and how it affords case-specific thick descriptions on the one hand while inviting the drawing

of abstract and portable conclusions on the other. I start with an introduction of Jo's argument. Thereafter, I discuss the overall process as long-term concatenation and turn to one of her case studies to capture the specific concatenation of mechanisms and idiosyncratic happenings that constituted it.

Collective memory and mnemonic contestation

Jo studies how collective memories shape politics, and vice versa. Her case is South Korea and the core of her argument is that South Korean–Japanese relations, the failure of a ‘deep’ reconciliation between the two countries, and anti-Japanism in South Korea are co-constituted by domestic memory struggles after Japanese imperial rule over the country. She defines collective memory as an ‘intersubjective understanding of the past’ (Jo, 2022: 772) and argues it is ‘entirely contextual’ and ‘depends on the historical trajectory through which it came to form and the political exigency for which it is mobilized in the present’ (Jo, 2022: 768).

Jo explicitly introduces her study as a PT study and identifies three mechanisms that are part of collective memory processes: framing, accrediting and binding (see Table 1). Although she does not present them as ideal types herself, their formulation immediately lends to their understanding in those terms. Framing, accrediting and binding are clearly abstract concepts.

Moreover, in reference to what Jack Levy described as theory-guided, idiographic case studies (Levy, 2008: 4), Jo argues she mobilizes the ‘details of specific cases to illustrate a broader theoretical argument’ (Jo, 2022: 778). That is, while her work presents mnemonic processes as complex and contextually embedded, she does expect her work to offer insights beyond the case(s) studied. She thus presents the conclusions as, somehow, portable and refers specifically to them becoming ‘politically useful in postcolonial, postwar, and post-authoritarian societies’ (Jo, 2022: 769). However, Levy proposes this type of case study as purely idiographic and does not explain how theory works in, or relates to, idiographic cases.

Table 1: Mechanisms of mnemonic contestation

Mechanism	Key concern	Process
Framing	What can be said?	A social process of interaction that involves negotiating how the past can be interpreted.
Accrediting	Who has a say?	A social process of interaction that involves redefining which narrators have authority to speak about the past.
Binding	Who can say what?	A social process of interaction that involves enforcing the narrative bounds to which narrators must conform.

Source: Jo, 2022: 775.

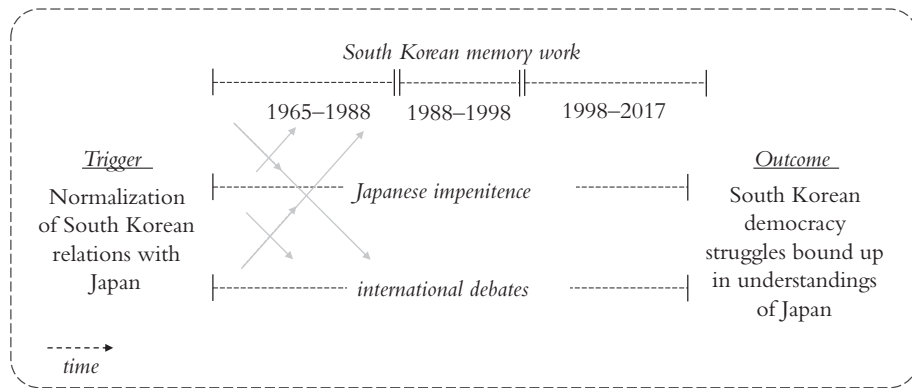
The overall process

The *process* as a whole runs from the initial normalization of South Korean relations with Japan in 1965 under Park Chung-hee, until 2017 where she stops her study. Jo understands South Korean domestic memory struggles as running parallel to two other processes: Japanese impenitence and overall international debates. These latter

two processes occasionally ‘come in’ and shape the concrete instantiations. That is, they are a causally productive part of the outcome. Figure 2 visualizes this broader, long-term process.

In line with Stefano Guzzini’s discussion (2012: 256–65), I emphasize that these processes probably developed at different speeds and with different levels of intensity at different points in time. The three indicated subprocesses of South Korean memory work are Jo’s case studies. Each is marked by different memory arguments, actors and institutional and international settings. For the other two processes we can imagine a similar flow of waxing and waning. Importantly, the arrows added at the beginning of the process are to indicate the continuous interactions between these processes.

Figure 2: Long-term normalization process



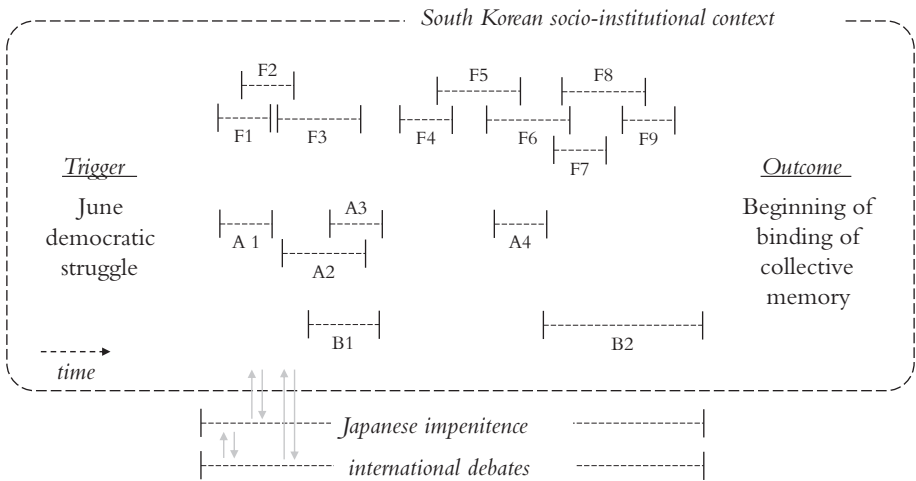
Source: Based on Jo, 2022.

Framing, accreditation and binding from 1988 to 1998

One of Jo’s empirical cases is ‘From Humiliation to Shame, 1988–98’ (Jo, 2022: 783–86). This subcase discusses South Korean memory work after the ‘June democratic struggle’ that ended authoritarian rule in the country. Civil society livened up and so did the debate about the past and Japan. Accreditation redefined which narrators had the authority to speak, giving a voice to new actors. These new actors largely rejected the ‘pragmatic’ frame that had dominated before, introduced a new frame of ‘humiliation’ and started to redefine the contours of acceptable stories.

Figure 3 offers a schematic depiction of the mechanism complex that shaped this case. Normally, such a figure would reflect the actual chronology of instantiations. For this illustration, although based on Jo’s case narrative, I improvised. The ‘F’ mechanisms regard instantiations of framing, the ‘A’ mechanisms instantiations of accrediting, and the ‘B’ mechanisms instantiations of binding. At times the instantiations run sequentially, at times they run in parallel. We would assume each instantiation is causally relevant for the overall outcome and we would assume the instantiations interacted with each other, allowing, supporting or counteracting the typical motions of the others. Importantly, we would also assume each instantiation is both shaped by and shapes the overall socio-institutional context. As such, the initial instances

Figure 3: Case-specific concatenation



Source: Based on Jo, 2022: 783–86.

of framing (F1–F3), accrediting (A1–A3) and binding (B1) are constituted by the context in which they played out, but they are also constitutive of the background against which the latter instantiations played out. F4–F9 are thus shaped by what is sayable as (co-)defined by B1.

I zoom in on instantiations F5 and B2. Jo describes how the democratic revolution allowed civil-society organizations to come into existence. ‘This wave of accrediting would prove consequential for reframing collective colonial memory: the new narrators normalized narratives of humiliation regarding Japanese impenitence’ (Jo, 2022: 784). If we denote this first wave between 1988 and 1990 as instantiations F1–F3, A1–A3 and B1, then F5 and B2 play out against that background.

In 1990, Roh Tea-woo, then president of South Korea, went on a three-day trip to Tokyo. During that trip, already different from earlier 1965–87 frames of pragmatism, he *framed* earlier Japanese expressions of regret as having been tepid and, as Jo notes, demanded ‘a more contrite apology from the Japanese emperor’ (Jo, 2022: 784). Instead of receiving such an apology, Roh was sent off empty-handed when a senior Japanese official stated that ‘[b]ecause the miseries of war were committed in the name of the Emperor, only the Emperor can provide a lasting apology’ (Jo, 2022: 784). In the end, the newly accredited civil-society actors found the Japanese reaction insufficient and could influence the stance Roh took in those days. As Jo continues: ‘But when the South Korean public found his apology wanting, Roh swiftly reframed his narrative strategy to plead for leniency: “Even if we may feel that the Japanese apologies do not fully live up to our expectations, we should accept them with magnanimity and generosity”’ (Jo, 2022: 784).

This episode can be seen as a social interaction of framing, counter-framing and reframing, and also hints at an instantiation of binding. Importantly, when it comes to *agency*, we may note that many actors made decisions that could have been different. That is, we can imagine that each of the civil-society actors and Roh engaged in behaviour that was situationally meaningful to them.

When it comes to other forms of case-specific *contingencies* two occurrences stand out. First, the (non-)apology offered by Japan upon Roh's initial demand is part of what spurred the critique by the newly accredited actors. Second, at one point Jo discusses how a corruption scandal incriminating then President Kim Young-sam led to an 'escalation of "historical rectification"' to bolster his favourability ratings (2022: 786). Both that non-apology and the corruption scandal are coincidental happenings that came in in causally productive ways. For analyticist PT, such causally productive contingencies can and should be part of the holistic case narrative. While it is easy to see that they are not part the mechanism(s) proper, they shaped what mechanisms instantiated and what those concrete instantiations looked like.

Discussion

Overall, Jo's paper offers a good basis from which to discuss analyticist PT. While having to invent the wheel herself, her mechanisms, although she does not use the term, can easily be understood as ideal types. In Jo's work, the mechanisms proper are abstract, theoretical and indeterminate; the concrete instantiations are case specific and contextually embedded. In what follows, I first discuss Jo's paper and how it could be strengthened as analyticist PT, thereafter I compare and contrast (my reinterpretation of) Jo's analyticist PT to Löblová's regularity-oriented approach to highlight the main differences.

Strengthening Jo's PT as analyticist PT

Considering the preceding discussion of analyticist PT, how could Jo's case studies and inferences be further strengthened and explicated? Probably the easiest way to further strengthen her case work and theoretical discussion is by foregrounding the distinction between the mechanisms proper on the one hand, and the concrete instantiations and how they concatenated into a case-specific processes on the other.

In the case narratives, Jo touches upon the mechanisms but does not always highlight which part of the case narratives are illustrations of which mechanism. This means it is up to the reader to carefully see how and when framing, accrediting and binding are at play in the cases. Simple short phrases such 'as an instance of framing', or 'exemplifying binding' would guide the reader through the empirical work and would stimulate more explicit theoretical reflections. Besides such short phrases, schematic depictions as I included them may make the (often) complex processes more tangible. Moreover, the potential for thick descriptions would invite the selection of a few instantiations to be presented in greater detail. In the example discussed, for instance, rather than stating that 'the South Korean public found this apology wanting', Jo could have drawn out how both old and new actors partook in an exchange illustrating that framing really is a social process of interaction. Thick descriptions of a few well-chosen exemplary instantiations can also make the mechanisms more 'palpable' (Small and McCrory Calarco, 2022: 81).

At the same time, analyticist PT is open to the case narratives going back and forth between the concrete instantiations, the process as a whole, and the mechanisms proper. In relation to that, Jo could have reflected more on how the processes, as specific concatenations, constituted the outcomes. For instance, we would expect that

different instantiations of framing, accrediting and binding interacted in case-specific ways. Certain frames may attempt to silence (bind) others, and previously successful bindings should shape the subsequent narrative space – the available and acceptable frames – and so forth. By going back and forth between the concrete instantiations, the process as a whole, and the de-particularized ideal types, the study could have been more explicit about if and how the empirical work amended or otherwise informed our understandings of the ideal types, as well as if and how the ideal types were indeed useful ‘conceptual tools’ and helped to make the cases intelligible.

Overall, one of the major benefits of analyticist PT is that it should stimulate explicit reflections on each the mechanisms proper, the concrete instantiations, and the process(es) as a whole. This is also relevant for the discussion of the portability of the mechanisms proper. As noted, Jo argues her research should aid our understanding of other ‘postcolonial, postwar, and post-authoritarian societies’ (Jo, 2022: 769), but she does not explicate *how* such a transposition would work. If we want to move beyond ‘mere’ case narratives and idiosyncratic explanations, the analyticist approach to PT introduced in this article provides the logic, tools and impetus to do that.

Comparing the two approaches

As a final step, I compare and contrast Löblová’s regularity-oriented PT to (my reinterpretation of) Jo’s analyticist study. As we will see, most of the practical distinctions I highlight derive from either distinguishing (the analyticist approach) or not (the regularity-oriented approach) between mechanisms, instantiations and processes. I focus on (1) the differences in the length and logic of processes and mechanisms; (2) the space for agency and contingency; and (3) the causal productivity of context and the difference between generalizability and portability.

Regarding the first, Löblová uses the terms mechanism and process roughly interchangeably. As she argues at one point: ‘the nature of *causal mechanisms* means that the individual parts of the *process* are more than just intervening variables’ (Löblová, 2018: 166, added emphasis). Moreover, while the steps in the mechanism may seem short, we could easily imagine them to span months. Take ‘forming a community’ as step. This step may entail multiple emails, calls and meetings to be finalized. In fact, we could imagine it as a process in and of itself – an idea I will get back to. Lastly, the regularity-oriented approach presents mechanisms as logically sequential. With this I mean that each antecedent step of a mechanism needs to be finished before the process can move on to the next. This gives the process a certain rigidity and means certain steps may not touch in time and space. In Löblová’s presentation, for instance, ‘promoting preferred policy options’ and ‘persuading decision makers’ are sequential but separated by ‘gaining access to decision makers’. Promoting and persuading do not interact with each other directly.

In contrast, in Jo’s case there is a clear distinction between the process, the instantiations and the mechanisms, and while the process is long (1965–2017) the concrete instantiations are short and focused. Moreover, the instantiations are expected to interact with each other and with other contextual factors and to have constitutive effects on both. Moreover, whereas Löblová’s mechanism (and thus the resulting processes) is sequential, the analyticist logic can be described as ‘modular’ (Nullmeier and Kuhlmann, 2022: 13). In Jo’s case, the different mechanisms ‘clicked’ together in

case-specific ways constituting the case-specific outcomes. But, importantly, the actual sequence, and the way the instantiations combined, could have been different without changing the mechanisms – or, more specifically, without necessarily changing our understanding of the mechanisms proper – that instantiated.

Interestingly, we could reimagine Löblová's steps – forming communities, promoting preferred policies, gaining access and persuading – as different mechanisms proper. Each mechanism proper would be short and focused and could instantiate multiple times as part of a case-specific process. Instantiations could run partly sequentially, partly in parallel and, importantly, interact. In part, this little thought experiment shows that one of the central affordances of analyticist PT (distinguishing between mechanisms proper, concrete instantiations and the processes they concatenate into) is not inherently interpretive. But it does undo the more rigid sequential logic of the regularity-oriented approach without changing our substantive understanding of the process and the activities the entities engaged in.

Regarding the second, in Löblová's theory the behaviours of actors are given, almost prescribed. *If* demand for input arises, relevant actors first *will* start forming a community, then they *will* promote their preferred policy options, and so forth. Any coincidental happening or any instance of agency – an instance where an actor behaved differently from how they were theorized to behave – would be seen as interfering with the regular working of the mechanism and as causing it to 'break down' (Löblová, 2018: 183). That is, actors are implicitly assumed to behave regularly under given conditions and contingencies cannot be accounted for.

Instead, in Jo's case agency brings substance to the otherwise abstract and indeterminate mechanisms proper. What accrediting, binding and framing mean in any concrete case is not a given. Both mechanisms and processes are explicitly open-ended and what actually happened in a case, and in which order, is always an empirical question. Moreover, neither agency nor any coincidental happening can break down a mechanism. In fact, both agency and case-specific contingencies are seen as (co-) constitutive of the outcome and should be part of the explanation of a case.

Regarding the third, in Löblová's study the context ensures *causal homogeneity* across cases. Causal homogeneity assumes cases to be causally similar: given the same context the same trigger should start the same mechanism bringing about the same outcome. This assumption is most explicitly seen in Mahoney's $X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$ understanding of mechanisms (Mahoney, 2015: 205). In Löblová's case, this understanding implies that if demand for export input is present and the mechanism is triggered, then it will play out as theorized. This assumption of causal homogeneity is what allows *generalizations* across cases because the scope condition(s) define(s) a regularity: if $X_1 \dots X_n$, then Y through mechanism M . In short, by 'holding the context constant' the mechanism–annex–process as a whole – with its specific steps and sequences – is understood to be generalizable to all other cases where the scope conditions (context) are present and the trigger occurs.

Instead, in Jo's case the context is 'thickly' productive. It is the socio-institutional context, with all its little idiosyncrasies, that explains the different forms and shapes the instantiations of the mechanisms take. Moreover, these idiosyncrasies and case-specificities are often of interest to the researcher and part and parcel of the overall explanation of the case(s). In fact, rather than theorizing causal homogeneity, the heterogeneity of cases is likely to be foregrounded in an analyticist PT. What is *portable*, then, are not the concrete instantiations but the abstract, de-particularized logics and motions of the mechanisms proper.

Overall, despite the sometimes nuanced differences between the two approaches to PT, they each have their own strengths and affordances. Important for the discussion at hand, however, is that analyticist PT is amenable to interpretive research by reconceptualizing mechanisms as ideal types and by distinguishing between mechanisms proper, their concrete instantiations and the processes they concatenate into.

Conclusion

This article aimed to advance analyticist PT for policy research. It argued analyticist PT affords the study of situationally contingent processes by balancing thick case descriptions with analytical generality and that, in so doing, analyticist PT is amenable to interpretive research in ways the regularity-oriented approach is not.

More specifically, in this article I suggested that we reconceptualize mechanisms as ideal types and explicitly distinguish between mechanisms proper, concrete instantiations, and processes. Taken together, this reconceptualization enables researchers to posit knowledge as socially constructed, offer meaning-sensitive and contextually rich case descriptions, and put forward a constitutive understanding of causation grounded in locally embedded processes.

These features should be understood as affordances of the method. They do not make analyticist PT inherently interpretive, but they do open the method to researchers bringing interpretive epistemologies, constructivist ontologies and reflexive research practices to it. In this way, analyticist PT can advance interpretive policy scholarship by presenting a coherent framework to producing context-sensitive yet transposable process-oriented studies and conclusions.

Notes

¹ I thank the anonymous reviewers for stressing this point. For a similar argument made in relation to interviews as data-gathering tool for qualitative research see [Soss \(2015: 164\)](#).

² Jackson discusses ‘analyticism’ as one of four ways of conducting social scientific research (the others being neo-positivism, critical realism and reflexivity; 2016). He derives analyticism from the combination of two philosophical assumptions: mind-world monism and phenomenism (2016: 124–5.).

³ As per Cambridge Dictionary: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/persuade>.

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The author of this article has declared that research ethics approval was not required since the article does not present or draw directly on data/findings from empirical research.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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