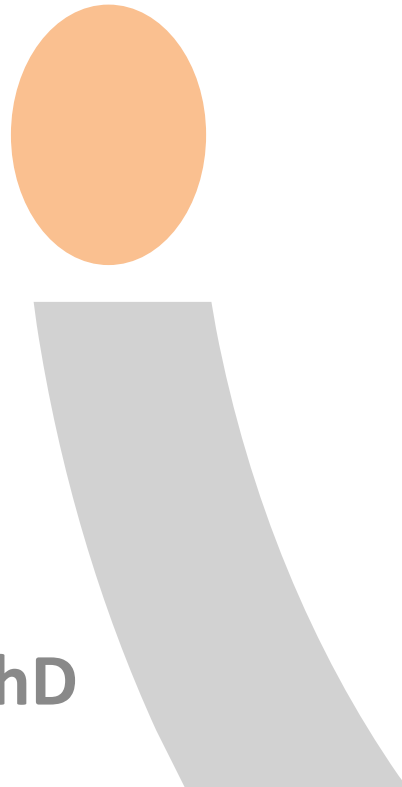


BSSn4495: Qualitative research in security studies

Questions, answers,
theory

March 9, 2021

Miriam Matejova, PhD



Agenda

- What is a good research question?
- What is theory?
- What is a *good* theory?

The features of science

- Transparent procedures
- Systematic use of evidence
 - Guided by clear rules/principles
- Testing our hunch against alternatives
- Acknowledging uncertainty

Descriptive, prescriptive, and causal questions

- Prescriptive/normative questions:
 - How **should** the world look?
- Descriptive questions
 - How **does** the world look?
- Causal questions
 - **Why** does the world look the way it does? What is the **cause** of this particular outcome?

Normative/prescriptive questions in politics

- Should the rich be paying more taxes?
- Is the intervention of Western countries in the affairs of sovereign nations justified?
- Other?

Descriptive questions in politics

- What proportion of tax collection comes from the rich?
- How many times in the last century have Western countries intervened in the affairs of sovereign nations?
- Other?

Causal questions in politics

- Does increasing taxes for rich people help or hurt economic growth?
- Why do Western governments choose to intervene in sovereign states?
- Other?

Types of claims

- *Normative/prescriptive claim*: Iran should not be allowed to have nuclear weapons.
 - Other?
- *Descriptive claim*: Five countries today are known to have nuclear weapons.
 - Other?
- *Causal claim*: Countries located in volatile regions are more likely to develop nuclear weapons.
 - Other?

Causal questions and claims

- **Why** something happens – or doesn't happen
- **The conditions** under which something happens
- **The effect** of something on something else
- **The process** through which one thing affects another

Causal effect: counterfactual definition

To say that “C is a cause of E” means:

If C had not happened,

then E would not have happened

(or E would be less likely to have happened)

Causal claims and counterfactuals

- Causal Claim: **Economic Recession (C)** caused the **defeat of the President (E)**
- Counterfactual: **If there were no Economic Recession (i.e. No C)**, then the **President would have won the election (i.e. No E)** or the **President would have been less likely to lose the election (i.e. E less likely)**

We observe UN intervention and the end of a civil war in country X. We claim that **UN intervention is a cause of civil wars ending**. Which of the following is a counterfactual claim that would support this causal claim?

- A. If the civil war had not been ongoing in country X, the UN would not have intervened.
- B. If the UN had not intervened in country X, the civil war would have ended.
- C. If the UN had not intervened in country X, the civil war would still be ongoing.
- D. When the UN intervenes in countries going through civil war, civil wars usually end.

Types of claims: summing up

- Descriptive
 - **No explicit statement about one thing influencing another**
 - Correlation between two things \neq causal
- Causal
 - **Explicit** statement about one thing exerting influence on another
 - “Does the claim directly imply that, *if* I could manipulate one factor, I should see a change in the other?”
- Prescriptive/normative
 - Requires placing some value on outcomes

Theory

- What is theory?
 - An explanation of some aspect of the world based on reasoning, observation, and/or experimentation.
- What is a *good* theory?
 - Describe, explain, predict, prescribe
 - Accuracy, generality, parsimony, causality

Accuracy

- Explain as much as possible and predict as accurately as possible;
- The higher the accuracy, the lower the generality and parsimony.

Generality

- Refers to a range of social phenomena to which the theory is applicable.
- The greater the theory's generality, the greater the range of phenomena the theory can explain.

Parsimony

- “The smaller the number of factors providing for a complete explanation of a given class of events, the more parsimonious the theory” (Przeworski 1970).
- Occam’s razor
 - The simplest explanation is usually the correct one

Theory, hypothesis, law

- **Law** = observed regular relationship between two phenomena
- **Hypothesis** = a speculated relationship between two phenomena
 - Can be causal or noncausal/correlational
- **Theory** = causal law or causal hypothesis + explanation about how A causes B
 - Explanation shows how the causation occurs