

# **BSSn4495: Qualitative research in security studies**

Nuts and bolts of  
process tracing

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# Agenda

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- Process-tracing:  
advantages,  
disadvantages, issues,  
practice

# How to process trace?

Examining a single instance in which the outcome did or did not occur and trying to explain why.

1. We wonder: Does C cause E?
2. We see that E is present and that C is present in a case.
  - But this doesn't tell us that C *caused* E in that case. How could we figure that out?
3. Think about the causal logic through which C *would* have caused E *if* C did cause E.
4. Now investigate the case to see whether that causal logic in fact unfolded within the case.

# What caused DRC civil war?

- Ethnic tensions?

Causal logic(s):

Historical ethnic hatreds → desire by each group to dominate or extinguish the other → increase in violence by each side designed to dominate/extinguish other group → spirals into all-out war

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# Process tracing tests

## Hoop test

- A test that a hypothesis *has* to pass for us to believe it (a “hoop” the theory has to jump through)
  - If hoop test failed: the hypothesis is greatly weakened
  - If hoop test passed: the hypothesis survives, but doesn't mean it's true

## Smoking gun test

- A test that can point strongly to the correctness of a hypothesis
  - If smoking gun test failed: the hypothesis survives
  - If smoking gun test passed: the hypothesis is very likely true

# Process tracing tests (cont.)

- **Straw in the wind test**
  - Passing = hypothesis is relevant but not confirmed
  - Failing = hypothesis is not eliminated but slightly weakened
- **Doubly decisive test**
  - Passing = hypothesis is confirmed and others are eliminated
  - Failing = hypothesis is eliminated



# What happens when tests are passed or failed?

Asymmetric outcomes

	H fails	H passes
Hoop test	H <u>greatly</u> weakened	H slightly strengthened
Smoking gun test	H slightly weakened	H <u>greatly</u> strengthened

# Process tracing tests: issues

- Deterministic vs probabilistic conclusions from PT tests
  - Hoop test as necessary for the validity of hypothesis?
  - Smoking gun test as sufficient for the validity of hypothesis?
- Easy vs difficult PT tests
- Triviality of conditions
- Ideational “clues”

# Process tracing: advantages

- Yields in-depth knowledge of context
- Opportunity for discovery
  - Immersion in a case often suggests causal claims we hadn't thought of before
  - Not just *testing* theories, but *developing* new theories
- Avoids troubles with correlation
  - Studying causal processes → less chance to be fooled by spuriousness, reverse causation, randomness

# Process-tracing: practice

- Choose a causal question
- Think of a **cause** that produces a somewhat lengthy causal chain to the effect
- Think of a **causal logic/causal story** that connects the cause to the effect
  - Causal logic:  $X \rightarrow p \rightarrow q \rightarrow r \rightarrow Y$
- What **evidence** would a researcher look for to support this causal logic in your case?

- Why are some countries poor?
- Resource curse → declined econ development
- Resource curse → corruption and monopolization of resource market → rentier state doesn't care about social/econ development → decline in economy