BSSn4495: Qualitative research in security studies

Case selection and generalization

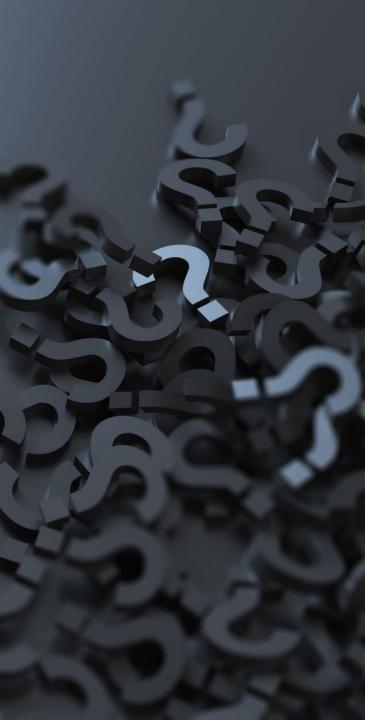**May 4, 2021**
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Agenda

- Cases and case study
- Generalization
- Process-tracing practice

Case

- "A spatially and temporally delimited phenomenon of theoretical significance" (Gerring 2017)
- States or state-like entities, organizations, social groups, events, individuals
- Cases = units, with the added implication that a case has a temporal boundary

Case study

- "the intensive (qualitative or quantitative) **analysis** of **a single unit or a small number of units (the cases)**, where the researcher's goal is to **understand a larger class of similar units** (a population of cases)" (Seawright and Gerring 2008)
- "the detailed examination of **an aspect of a historical episode** to develop or test historical explanations that may be **generalizable** to other events" (George and Bennett 2005)

How do we pick cases?

- We want:
  - A representative sample
  - A variation on the dimensions of theoretical interest

Types of generalization

- Broader category of space
- Broader category of time
- Broader category of persons
- Broader category of substantive phenomena

Specific vs. general knowledge

- SPECIFIC
  - What caused the Rwandan civil war?
    - Hutu-Tutsi hatred
    - Belgian race policies   ————— SPECIFIC EXPLANATION
  - Explains **a case**

- GENERAL
  - What causes civil war?   ————— GENERAL EXPLANATION
    - Ethnic diversity/hatred
    - Colonial race policies
  - Explains a **phenomenon**   → **A THEORY OF CIVIL WAR**

Specific to general

– **MORE SPECIFIC:** A cause of "increased welfare spending"(E) in the US from 1960 to 2000 is "whether the government is headed by a Left Party"(C)

– **MORE GENERAL**: A cause of "increased welfare spending"(E) in the advanced industrialized countries in the post-war period is "whether the government is headed by a Left Party"(C)

From specific to general, and back again

- **Specific** cases inspire hunches about **general** phenomena
- General hunches **tested** against specific cases
  - A few, or
  - Lots

  → BUILDING AND TESTING **THEORIES**

- Understanding of general phenomenon can help **explain** specific cases

Basis for generalization

- Two factors that limit our ability to generalize:
  - **Conditional effects:** Whether **C** has an effect on **E** may depend on a set of "background conditions" that exist in certain contexts and not others (i.e., conjunctural causation)
  - **Conceptual stretching:** Causes and effects may mean different things in different contexts

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?