BSSn4495: Qualitative research in security studies

Nuts and bolts of process tracing

March 29, 2022

Miriam Matejova, PhD

Agenda

- Process-tracing: 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

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

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

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

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: 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→p→q→r→Y

- What **evidence** would a researcher look for to support this causal logic in your case?