BSSn4495: Qualitative research in security studies

Questions, answers, theory

February 29, 2024

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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 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

Types of claims: summing up

- Descriptive
  - **No explicit statement about one thing influencing another**
  - Correlation between two things ≠ 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

How do we make theories?

- Deductively
- Inductively
- Other ways?