

Introduction to Qualitative Comparative Analysis

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--Preliminary Notes for
Beginners**

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QCA

- Comparative social research has a long history, including Theda Skocpol's substantial studies of comparative historical trajectories.
- (A list of references is attached.)
- QCA also has roots in the work of JS Mill, whose meaning is however contested, because both empiricists and substantivists can refer to Mill as a source of advice.

Mill's presence and absence comparisons

- As Skocpol clarified in an excellent review article, Mill argued that the presence of a factor in a series of cases, all leading to an outcome of interest, suggests that that factor positively contributes to Y and may be a cause of Y.
- It is likely to be a sufficient cause.
- Comparison with cases where X and Y are both absent is necessary to make this argument.

Sufficient Cause

- Furthermore, it is necessary to have some cases where Y is present, but X is absent, if we want to argue that X is a sufficient cause of Y yet not a *necessary cause*.
- Ragin has summarised the possible combinations for multiple X's and Y's in three excellent books.

Necessary Causes: Discerning Them?

- To adduce that an X is necessary as a cause of Y, we need cases where
 - X is present and Y is present;
 - Other possible combinations, e.g. X is present and Y is absent, or vice versa
- We need to go into multi-dimensional analysis to know whether X is really necessary for Y to occur.

Doubting the Conclusion About X Being a Necessary Cause

- 1. There is more complexity in a multi-dimensional world. There can be cases where X is present and Y is absent! In these cases, perhaps, some other factor Z is missing, and it was Z that made X sufficient for Y to occur. Therefore it is not X that is necessary for Y, but rather Z that is necessary for Y.
- 2. Even if in all observed or recorded cases, X and Y appear together or are absent together, this does not imply that X necessarily causes Y. Other data would be necessary to establish this as a well-justified argument. Evidence could be of several kinds. See Sayer (1992).

Ragin's QCA Takes This Logic Further

- Ragin advises that we use a substantive comparative methodology.
- He advises gathering a small N of cases, comparing them deliberately using various types of evidence, summarising the intermediate results in a table, reducing the table using Boolean logic, iterating, and then drawing conclusions.
- He doesn't give a protocol but the above paragraph is a short summary of how one might proceed.

The Ontology of Complex Causation

- The real causes are not in the data set. The variables are mere representations of real causes.
- Therefore the knowledge about causes is:
 - A) grounded in theoretical frameworks, which each need a good ontology;
 - B) subject to revision with new evidence.
- X is unlikely to be 'independent' of Z and other factors
- If X always implies Y, then they may be part of the same 'THING' so look at what causes X. Widen the property space.

Details of Steps:

- small N of cases
- compare them deliberately
- use various types of evidence,
- summarise the intermediate results in a table
- reduce the table using Boolean logic – you simplify the table (perhaps using software called QCA)
 - Look for necessary causes
 - Look for sufficient causes
 - Decide whether your outcome was well enough specified or not
- iterate: move back to earlier steps and re-do it all
- then draw conclusions.

- Fascinating.

Readings

- Ragin Charles, C. (1987). *The comparative method : moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies*. Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Ragin Charles, C. (1991). *Issues and alternatives in comparative social research*. Leiden, Brill.
- Ragin, C. (1994) *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method*, [for undergraduate students and dissertations], Pine Forge Press.
- Ragin, C. (2000) *Fuzzy Set Social Science* Chicago: University of Chicago Press