Systematic Configurational Comparative Methods: their Added Value for Policy-oriented Research

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NCRM (National Centre for Research Methods) and ESRC Symposium on
"Small and Large-N Comparative Solutions"
September 22-23, University of Sussex, Brighton

8-course menu

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2. Definitions and labels
3. SCCA: key features
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5. Recent advances in SCCA ← → policy analysis
6. Remaining challenges ('generic', methodological)
7. Remaining challenges (specific, policy-linked)
8. (open Conclusion)

1. Introduction

- From where do I speak ?
  - Comparative politics → systematic comparative methods
  - « small N » network (COMPASSS)
  - Dissemination, training & methodological debates (ECPR SG; new ECPR SumSch, Ljubljana 7-18 Aug. 2006; …)
- In which context do I speak ?
  - Growing interest in SCCA methods
  - Still large (unexploited) potential
  - After ESF exploratory workshop (Sept. 2004) → forthcoming module (Rihoux & Grimm (eds) 2005)
- What am I going to speak about ? Broad overview of issues around SCCA and the connection SCCA ← → PA

2. Definitions and labels

- « SCCA » (QCA, MVQCA, FS, [+ MSDO/MDSO])
  - Systematic (formal treatment; systematic examination)
  - Configurational (conception of cases & causality)
  - Comparative ('regularities', & *some* level of generalization)
- NB : both an « approach » and a set of « methods » (techniques, with software : fs/QCA, TOSMANA [& MSDO/MDSO])

3. SCCA: key features

- Original ambition/goal (Ragin 1987) : « synthetic strategy » : *"integrate the best features of the case-oriented approach with the best features of the variable-oriented approach"*

[here below : QCA mainly; could be discussed for MVQCA & FS]

- The « qualitative » features of SCCA
  - Holistic view of cases
  - Case-sensitivity
  - Causality : "multiple conjunctural causation" (…)
  - Enables processing of "qualitative" data

- The « quantitative » features of SCCA
  - Enables the analysis of « more than a few » cases
  - Analytic method (variables : « conditions » and « outcome »)
  - Replicability
  - Parsimony
  - Also enables processing of « quantitative » data
- Specifically designed for «small N » (intermediate-N) situations
- …so is this a 'middle way' ?
  - Yes…
  - …and no

4. « Policy-oriented research » ?

- NB : diversity of research questions, but one crucial distinction (// policy cycle) :
  - Focus on agenda-setting and policy formulation (…)
  - Focus on policy implementation and evaluation (…)
- In both cases : quite many compatibilities/proximities with 'SCCA thinking'

5. Recent advances & rejoinders (SCCA ←→ PA)

- Applicability (concrete applications)
- Transparency
- Improvements in comparative research design (case selection & model specification)
- Reduction of complexity
- "(partly) distinct paths" leading to a similar outcome : useful for policy practitioners
- Tests with different operationalizations (QCA, MVQCA, FS), on different types of data

- Applications at different levels (from int'l to local)
- Infusion of 'case-based knowledge' in the analytic procedure
- + combinations and confrontations with other methods (e.g. stat.; SNA; …)
- Possibility to bring closer together 'theory' with policy-driven, real-world questions.

6. Remaining challenges (generic, methodological)

- NB :
  - there are no « miracle methods »
  - Any comparative endeavour : tough dilemmas
- Case selection (similarities… and variation)
- Model specification
  - Abundance of 'theories'
  - How to keep the number of conditions under control ? (one possible avenue : "remote" v/s "proximate" conditions, in a 'two-set' analysis : Schneider & Wagemann)
- Operationalization and data processing (measurement, validity, dichotomization thresholds etc.)

- Confrontation/dialogue with other methods:
  - 'conventional' and less conventional stat. analysis
  - SNA
  - "thick" case studies
  - Inclusion of the time dimension (how to combine with "sequence analysis" methods ? (…)
  - Etc…

7. Remaining challenges (specific, ← → PA)

- Measurement and coding : specific difficulties (transparency requires… good justifications !)
- Dichotomization threshold (can have direct implications on the results of the analysis, also policy-wise)
- Treatment of "logical contradictions" (…) [NB : good heuristic device to improve model specification !]
- The parsimony/complexity tension (to what extent may 'simplifying assumptions' be used ?) [also important, e.g. in terms of policy advocacy]

- Develop a better dialogue between ‘academics’ and ‘decision-makers’ (policy community)
  - Bring more ‘theory’ back in : is theory-guided work compatible with pragmatic policy-making needs ?
  - Cope with ‘real-life’ policy research dilemmas : political constraints v/s methodological ‘purity’ ? (e.g. case selection, time constraints, access to data, …)
  - Providing ‘readable’ and ‘easy-to-use’ conclusions (?)

8. Conclusion

…open to discussion