Methods War: How Ideas Matter within Political Science

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PATRICIA SOHN, NOV 24 2016

I am not an axe-murderer. I am just an historical institutionalist who happens to work within comparative politics.

I work on the judiciary. On social movements. On micro-level politics. I am interested in practices on the ground; in what happens at the informal level; in processes; in ideas. It is unlikely that you will find me citing Schumpeter, although it is possible on an outside day. You are more likely to find me citing James Scott, Pierre Bourdieu, Emile Durkehim or Max Weber. Call me a classicist.

I do in-depth interviews centering on people's life stories around a political question at hand. And I do political ethnography. I collect government statistics when I am overseas, the types that appear in foreign languages and are not available on the internet. I have constructed and conducted one national-level survey. It is hard to write and conduct one's own survey, particularly in a foreign language taking into consideration local customs and sensitivities. The work that we do in qualitative, field work based political science is significant, rigorous, and thoughtful.

And, yet, as a qualitative researcher, my work is largely suspect within my sub-field. I often wonder why.

I was thoroughly trained in qualitative field methods. I was trained in the methodological issues, ethical problems, and practical application of qualitative field methods in practice on-research-site. I was trained in these methods at several universities and through three Social Science Research Council international dissertation workshops.

Today, some U.S. political science journals are requiring that qualitative researchers attach an appendix of their field notes and/or other supporting data to articles that they submit for consideration for publication. Some justify this movement as an attempt to make qualitative work both transparent and reproducible – as if transparency and reproducibility in the scientific method is something we qualitative researchers simply never considered before their brilliant idea; as if we were not trained and raised on Thomas Kuhn.

Good qualitative work *is* transparent. It is transparent in the sense that the methods are discussed and the links between argument and evidence are elaborated along specific methodological criteria. It is reproducible. Any scholar can spend ten to twenty years of his or her life, learn qualitative methods, learn the necessary languages, live in the field, gather archival data (which is illegal to share under most circumstances), conduct interviews, and engage in years-long rigorous observations of a political context on-site. That is what qualitative field research *is*. If the work is laid out correctly, an outside qualitative scholar can quite easily evaluate it and argue yay or nay as to its relative accuracy, validity, and other issues relating to its relative methodological soundness. If it is not laid out correctly, that is also easy for a qualitatively-trained scholar to observe.

This movement in U.S. political science journals is anti-intellectual in that it does not show respect for the various forms of deep and rigorous methodological training in which political scientists at different programs engage. So, for example, *anyone* who does qualitative methods knows well that field notes are almost always confidential under human subjects provisions within one's university and are thus – literally – *illegal* to share.

Faculty can be fired for sharing such materials. So, our top-ranking U.S. political science journals, in their great wisdom and understanding of the broad range of their own discipline, are giving qualitative faculty the choice between publish-or-perish, or be fired for breaching the law by sharing materials that are confidential. *That* kind of equation is called a hostile takeover. This on top of the fact that these materials are proprietary work product that a scholar spends years collecting. Qualitative scholars cannot just turn to a pre-collected data set to do our work year after year, as valuable as that work is. Our methods require that we (continually) collect the material on our own in the field, often in foreign languages, and under difficult living conditions.

Asking a quantitative scholar – usually – for his or her data set means asking him or her to provide a pre-established collection of material that he/she did not collect personally.

Asking a qualitative researcher to provide his or her (usually confidential) qualitatively collected data is asking him or her to hand over sometimes ten years' worth of research in the field. Sometimes twenty. Sometimes thirty. For what? So that someone else can play with it and try to prove him or her wrong on the fly without any country knowledge or time in the field; or, worse yet, with country knowledge, but no understanding of qualitative methods?

There is a cannibalistic quality to this move in political science. It is ugly. It is exceedingly unethical. It has everything to do with individual egos, methodological control of the institutions of our discipline, and lack of power-sharing across methods. In a number of cases, it – horrifyingly, for this day and age – also has to do with posturing amongst specific university political science programs. Their posturing and competition does a disservice to the discipline. It harms all of us. It harms the integrity of the intellectual process. None of it has anything to do with theory building.

A more traditional method of arriving at the question of rigor in a given qualitative article would be the, apparently passé, professional peer review process, in which qualitatively trained researchers review the work of other qualitatively trained researchers.

By qualitatively trained researchers, I do not mean those who claim, today, to do 'mixed-methods'. 'Mixed-methods,' as far as I have been able to observe – call me an ethnographic observer within the discipline – means, roughly, 'I do both math *and* statistics.' Large-N is also *not qualitative*. 'Process-tracing' is not qualitative unless it is qualitative.

As much as you may love both country *and* western, it is not the same as rock n' roll. You may love it all. But few are equally moved by both ends of the spectrum to be able to teach them equally well. If you are not one of the handful of scholars who has truly spent as much time on the ground in the field as in data sets, do not presume to claim to be me. I do not claim to be you.

If you work on a concept derived from qualitative work, say, *informal processes*, cite the concept as it comes from the qualitative literature. *This is also required by law*. Then, do your quantitative work with it. But do not claim that you are now a qualitative scholar, and that you can therefore legitimately *represent* (read that, *displace*) qualitative scholars in disciplinary institutions and journals.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Visiting Faculty, Kathmandu University—Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies (KU-NCCS), Hatiban, Lalitpur, Nepal. She is co-editor of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics* (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press, Second Edition, 2017).