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Student Feature – Spotlight on Qualitative Methods in International Relations

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KEVIN WENG, SEP 4 2019

Within the sub-field of international relations and the larger field of political science, qualitative methods play an important role in how academics create, outline, and validate their arguments. As a general rule of thumb, qualitative research – which incorporates the use of non-numerical evidence – is regularly juxtaposed with quantitative research – which is based on the use of numerical evidence. While quantitative methods make up the majority of research in international relations, scholars in the field that utilize qualitative methods regularly do so for several reasons: (1) the lack of acceptable metrics for quantifying available evidence, (2) an interest in “puzzling” or outlier cases, and (3) a concern with testing existing arguments and hypotheses.

First, much of the evidence available to IR scholars is inherently “messy” and difficult to quantify in a consistent and scientifically “objective” manner. Government censorship, inconsistent data preservation practices, self-reporting bias, and other types of world-induced selection bias outside of a researcher’s control make it difficult to employ common statistical techniques that require representative and un-biased samples. Although growing accessibility to government figures, refinements to coding practices, and a push towards collecting experimental data are improving the quality of research on many fronts, IR scholars continue to research topics where evidence is only selectively accessible and/or not conducive to numerical coding schemes without an acceptable loss of context.

For example, Lindsey O’Rourke’s research on covert military interventions and Austin Carson’s research on secret state communications both heavily draw upon de-classified U.S. diplomatic documents and a thinner collection of de-classified materials from foreign governments even less interested than the U.S. in revealing the inner workings of secret diplomatic communications. While such evidence is inevitably incomplete, a more representative sampling of covert government activities will remain unavailable unless there is a significant shift in political transparency. Additionally, even if such evidence were to eventually become available, finding an acceptable way of objectively quantifying the double-speak of diplomats and the implicit rationales of seemingly straightforward executive commands would remain inordinately difficult. In another example, Lee Ann Fujii interrogates the practice of “extra-lethal violence” in which individuals visibly desecrate the bodies of their victims through a variety of transgressive means. Whereas quantitative studies typically measure the “lethality” of violence by counting the number of victims for each violent event, such coding schemes do not adequately capture the oftentimes excessively performative and gratuitous manner in which victims are killed. Hence, the “extra-lethality” of violent acts remains under-studied.

Second, whereas quantitative research in IR aims to discover “generalizable” findings that can be extended to multiple observations without a significant loss in explanatory power, qualitative research in IR is oftentimes drawn to anomalous and “puzzling” cases that are counter-intuitive or rare to the point where they don’t represent a large enough population for general inference. In other words, the characteristics that make a case an outlier – and, hence, un-representative of a statistical mean – are precisely what attract qualitative researchers interested in explaining why outliers are outliers in the first place.

The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union is an obvious example of a rare event with substantial interest to IR scholars that did not occur through the traditionally expected channels of state breakdown, such as military invasion or violent internal rebellion. Other qualitative works in IR have since focused on political occurrences that are less obviously

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newsworthy but no less puzzling in their existence. For example, Martha Finnemore points to the puzzle of why modern states engage in institutional practices – i.e. providing medical assistance to enemy wounded, the creation of costly scientific bureaucracies with uncertain payoffs, the re-framing of economic development in distributional terms rather than GDP per capita – that are economically and militarily counter-productive. Even more perplexing is that such institutional practices were once quite rare but have since become widely adopted by contemporary states. In a more focused example, Lisa Wedeen analyzes the puzzling rationale behind the extravagantly expensive monetary investments into building up a relatively shabby cult of personality surrounding Syrian president Hafez al-Asad. Although cults of personality are not uncommon in totalitarian regimes with charismatic figureheads, the cult of the relatively un-charismatic Asad is particularly unique in that it neither provides tangible benefits to his popularity nor establishes his moral right to rule.

Finally, and somewhat more controversially, some qualitative IR scholars justify their methodologies by framing their research as a crucial test for existing arguments and hypotheses. While many academics dispute the notion that a qualitative study based off of a handful of cases can convincingly test an argument without a larger and more representative sample size, IR scholars utilizing qualitative methods typically push back by (1) focusing on cases that are “most-likely” to confirm established arguments and (2) testing for hypothesized mechanisms within these cases.

In one illustrative example, economists and political scientists have long argued that developing states with high levels of “lootable” natural resources (e.g. diamonds, timber, oil, etc.) are more prone to fight violent internal conflicts. In explaining this relationship, some scholars hypothesize that the high accessibility of natural resources makes it easier for potential rebels to pay for the “startup costs” of mobilizing a rebellion. Others argue that large natural resource deposits make the state a more valuable prize to be captured, thereby inviting rebellion from “greedy” malcontents. Alternatively, researchers point to a “grievance” mechanism in which states engaging in inconsiderate resource extraction antagonize local populations that may be poorly compensated and thus incentivized to rebel. In qualitatively testing for which of these hypothesized mechanisms could be driving the relationship between natural resources and internal conflict, Michael Ross focuses on a medium population of cases in which many of these theorized mechanisms were most likely to occur (i.e. developing states in Africa with large natural resource deposits fighting internal rebellions). By looking for qualitative indicators of different causal mechanisms, Ross points out that evidence indicating a mechanism of facilitated startup costs for rebellion and a mechanism of political grievances are largely absent.

Overall, the realm of qualitative research in IR regularly complements its quantitative counterpart even though methodological tensions continue to exist between the two traditions. While the ecology of qualitative research is highly diverse and riven with its own internal sub-divisions, it nonetheless continues to play an active role in how IR scholars develop and refine their arguments. Burgeoning IR academics that wish to incorporate such methods into their own research will thus be exposed to a richly robust and fitfully passionate debate between academics of all stripes.

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