Introduction to Qualitative Comparative Analysis

By Wendy Olsen
--Preliminary Notes for Beginners

wendy.olsen@manchester.ac.uk

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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


