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'Qualitative' Methods?

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In this chapter, I neither present a method nor draw conclusions about the methods presented in the substantive chapters of this book. Rather, I reflect on the category around which this book is organized. The term 'qualitative' evokes a narrative or analytical richness, a method that brings out more detail and nuance from a case than can be found by reducing it to quantitative measures. But in practice, the term is generally used simply to mean 'not quantitative,' as Matthew Hoffmann notes in his discussion of agent-based modeling. Qualitative methods are, in this sense, a default category.

At first glance this categorization seems benign. What harm is there in a default category for methods that are not covered in the quantitative methods classes that so many graduate programs in political science require of their students? But the categorization is problematic, for two sets of reasons. The first of these is that to speak of qualitative methods is pedagogically counterproductive. It misleads students, and to the extent that we internalize the categorical distinction, it misleads researchers as well. The second set of reasons is that the phrase is politically fraught. To speak of qualitative methods is to stake a claim in the methodological disputes that divide the field of political science. Discussion of 'qualitative methods' becomes a proxy for claims about what does or does not constitute legitimate political science, because any method that fails to fit even into the default category cannot really be legitimate. To speak of some methods under the heading of qualitative implicitly but clearly stigmatizes others.

I should stress at this point that the argument here is about categorization – it is not about the legitimacy or utility of any particular method. Of course, a claim that discussion of 'qualitative methods' as a category inherently makes claims about what constitutes legitimate

political science by its own logic must make a claim about what constitutes legitimate political science. The perspective underlying this discussion is one of methodological pluralism, but at the same time of a need for methodological specificity. The conclusion will return to the idea of methodological specificity, making the argument that real pluralism is incompatible with the dichotomization implied by a quantitative/qualitative divide.

Pedagogy and qualitative methods

The use of the phrase 'qualitative methods' is often found in the context of pedagogy, of teaching people how to use method(s). And that is the primary point of this book. Therefore, an important step in assessing the effects of having this category (as opposed to whatever particular methods we may put in it) is to ask what the pedagogical effects are. Not only does this particular categorization not help in the teaching of international relations methods, but it can be actively misleading, for three general reasons. First, it implies that these methods have some core feature in common. This has the effect of highlighting similarities and obscuring differences. Second, it confuses the difference between analysis and research design. This has the effect of highlighting differences and obscuring similarities among methods that cross the quantitative/qualitative divide. (I'll comment below on the place of formal methods.) Third, it fetishizes method, which both contributes to the reification of particular methodological divides and privileges empirical analysis over theory.

There's no core

What does one teach in a qualitative methods course? Much the same as one puts in a book on qualitative methods – some of everything, except for quantitative methods. The range in this book goes from discourse analysis to personality profiling, from feminism to agent-based modeling. It is, after all, a default category. Let us leave for now the question of what gets left out of the course (or book) – I will return to that in the next section, on the politics of qualitative methods in international relations. Many approaches to the pedagogy of qualitative methods are self-consciously pluralist, and as such aim to include as broad a range of specific methods in the course (or book) as possible. (For an assortment of syllabi, see the website of the Consortium on Qualitative Research Methods at <http://www.asu.edu/clas/polisci/cqrm/syllabi.html>.)

Such inclusiveness, however, leaves one in a pedagogical quandary. One cannot cover all qualitative methodologies, if for no other reason than there is no discrete set of methodologies that one can claim to have covered comprehensively. At the same time, the more one strives for inclusiveness, the less one can do justice to most, if not all, of them, due to lack of time or expertise. That leaves a hodge podge that does not build on the sort of common core found in introductory quantitative methods classes. It implies, for example, that small-*n* inferential analysis bears more categorical similarity to Foucauldian genealogy than to statistical analysis.

The lessons are twofold. First, one is suggesting that there is a discrete number of qualitative methods that can sensibly be reviewed in the absence of a research question/focus. While it is true that courses in quantitative method also cover a variety of specific techniques, these build from a core that is taught at the beginning. Second, there is an implication that an understanding of individual qualitative methods takes only a week or two, unlike an understanding of quantitative methods, which takes a sequence of courses. So there cannot be as much to them.

The goal of a course on quantitative methods is clear: to teach a discrete set of techniques useful in analyzing certain types of data (those that have been quantified) once these data have been gathered. This raises the question of the analog for qualitative methods. There are no clear guidelines about how to interpret when using interpretive methods. Chapters in this book, ranging from Leander, Neumann, and Dunn to Checkel, ultimately rely on the good sense of the researcher, rather than clear replicable rules for deciding on issues of evidence and interpretation (although Duffy seeks to remedy this problem).

There are writing skills that are perhaps analogous to the statistical skills taught in data analysis classes. Learning how to write better may serve many of our students well, but that is not what we generally teach in qualitative methods classes. Or we might teach things like epistemology and research design that are not directly analogous to the quantitative techniques. For example, the categorical distinction between positivism and post-positivism would make much more sense if one went beyond a general survey. But questions of epistemology and research design are not best divided along quantitative–qualitative lines.

Analysis and research design

Since courses intended as qualitative equivalents of quantitative methods courses are, in a sense, inherently hollow, they tend to be filled

with things other than analytical technique. These range from data-gathering techniques, such as elite interviewing and content analysis, to discussions of epistemology and the philosophy of the social sciences. What these things have in common is that they are not inherent to the category of qualitative methods.

Teaching (and thinking about) them in the context of discussions of qualitative method, understood in categorical terms as the contradistinction to quantitative method, has the effect of confusing issues of analytic technique with broader issues of research design. Few issues of research design are specific to quantitative analysis, understood as the use of statistics, other than the need to find data that are quantifiable. If one understands quantitative analysis more broadly as international-relations-with-numbers (or more precisely with mathematical symbols), there are no issues of research design that are specific to it.

This confusion artificially delimits the flexibility of specific data-gathering techniques, in a relatively straightforward way. Few specific data-gathering techniques are suited only to statistical analysis. Typically, any information-gathering techniques can be used to generate either quantitative or qualitative data. Compare, for example, Hermann on content analysis and Duffy on pragmatic analysis (in this book). To use techniques only to generate quantifiable data would be to lose much, if not most, of the meaning and nuance in the information. Assigning the discussion of data-gathering techniques to courses on qualitative and/or quantitative analysis is either redundant (if done in both) or misleading (if done in one but not the other).

A second effect of the confusion of analytical techniques with research design is that it obscures distinctions in research design that do not correlate with a quantitative/qualitative distinction. As King, Keohane, and Verba argue in *Designing Social Inquiry* (1994), the requirements of research design necessary to substantiate inferential claims is the same whether or not the cases will be subjected to statistical tests. The need for care in the specification of variables, case selection, and data validity are the same either way. Checkel makes a similar case (in this book) on causal process tracing, although he notes differences between causal and correlational analysis that King, Keohane, and Verba fail to address. This is not to suggest that we should be focusing on research that makes inferential claims, only that many scholars of international relations do make such claims, and the requirements of research design to do so cross the quantitative/qualitative boundary.

Similarly, critical theory research looks not at 'objective' data, but at the discourses through which we understand the political; see, for

example, Neumann and Dunn (in this book). This sort of distinction also does not correlate with a quantitative/qualitative divide. Critical approaches are more reasonably introduced in general epistemology courses (and expanded upon in methods courses that focus specifically on the discursive), rather than lumped in qualitative methods courses along with small-*n* inferential studies with which they are epistemologically incompatible. In a discipline in which (particularly in the United States) quantitative methods courses are often required of graduate students but qualitative methods courses are not (Schwartz-Shea 2005), to discuss critical approaches primarily in the context of a course on qualitative methods is to allow students who focus on quantitative methods to avoid learning about it altogether.

The upshot of these observations is that there is an argument to be made for teaching epistemology and research design issues comparatively, rather than separately through distinct qualitative and quantitative methods courses. This still leaves scope for teaching particular techniques or approaches, be they analytical techniques such as statistics, data-gathering techniques such as surveys, or philosophical approaches such as critical theory. The common theme in all three of these examples is that they are organized around a core of ideas.

Fetishizing method

These three examples are not fully analogous, however. Statistics are a method of data analysis. Surveys are a method of data gathering. Critical theory, however, is not necessarily best understood as method. While it does involve method (which both Neumann and Dunn discuss in a gratifyingly accessible way), understanding critical theory also requires thinking about epistemology in a way that thinking about quantitative methods does not.

Statistical analysis can be approached from a mutually incompatible array of epistemologies, from logical positivism to philosophical realism, and a quantitative methods course can do a perfectly good job of training students in statistical techniques without addressing these epistemological distinctions. A course in critical theory cannot. This makes discussion of critical theory in a 'methods' course incomplete in a way that is not true of discussion of statistical techniques. A response to a prevalence of quantitative methods courses and literatures that focuses on qualitative methods as a category thus risks fetishizing method at the expense of broader issues of epistemology, methodology, and theory.

This is not to suggest that getting method right, and doing it well, is not important. But too great a focus on method can distract from other

key parts of the research process. For example, studying technique in the absence of a broader epistemological context can lead to a commitment to technique without a clear grasp of its uses and limits. Another part is theory and theory-building. Too great a focus on method biases our work toward empirical analysis and away from theory. More broadly, fetishizing method risks distracting us from the study of politics. One often sees statistically elegant studies of politically banal questions. Accepting the quantitative focus on method and mapping it onto non-quantitative approaches risks importing a norm that how you study international politics is more important than what you study. Beyond fetishizing method generally, the creation of 'qualitative methods' as a category in response to the prevalence of quantitative methods courses reifies that divide as the predominant feature of international relations pedagogy. This is problematic both because it is misleading, thereby leading to muddled thinking about epistemology and method, and because it is prone to becoming a focus of debate in the field, distracting from the actual study of international politics.

While the problems with qualitative methods as a category have been discussed above, quantitative methods as a category may seem more straightforward. Quantitative analysis is analysis of numerical (or quantified) data using statistical techniques. But this category is often used to refer to any approach that uses mathematical symbols. For example, game theory is often lumped in with statistical techniques, because both seem to be mathematically intensive, and practitioners of both are prone to claiming the mantle of science for their approach alone. This lumping is sometimes done on the qualitative side of the divide. Witness the absence of game theory in most qualitative methods courses (although not all – witness the inclusion of the Hoffmann chapter in this book). It is also done on the quantitative side. See, for example, the National Science Foundation funded Empirical Implications of Theoretical Models project, which is premised on the idea that good political science requires bridging the gap between formal modeling and statistical modeling, without addressing any of the epistemological issues raised by this premise (NSF 2002).

Other than a common use of mathematical symbols, these two approaches have little in common and are in important ways epistemologically mutually incompatible (MacDonald 2003). Lumping them together may make social and sociological sense, given the construction of the academic field of international relations in the United States at this point in time, but it makes neither methodological nor epistemological sense. The fetishization of method obscures these differences.

A reification of a quantitative/qualitative divide also leaves a number of approaches in a categorizational limbo (and missing from this book's attempt at inclusiveness). If we consider complex game theory to be a quantitative method, what do we do with narrative game theory? Is a discussion of the prisoners' dilemma quantitative or qualitative? And what about network analysis? At one level it should not matter at all – if one wants to do agent-based modeling, one should read Hoffmann's chapter, learn the requisite computer skills, and then just do it. But at another level, if we reify a methodological divide in the sociology of the field, fitting into neither category means not fitting into the field's map at all (as Hoffmann discusses).

This last observation leads to my second general point, and the next section. The categorization of methods is not just a pedagogical act. It is also a political act. It is not just about what gets put where, but about who gets put in which side of a dichotomy, and who gets excluded altogether. And these inclusions and exclusions affect who gets research resources, and who gets published.

Power and qualitative methods

Whatever the pedagogical effects of the creation of qualitative methods as a category, it is both a result and a cause of the politics of exclusion in the discipline of international relations. The creation of the category and its ancillary courses, books, and organizations is a response to the perceived privileged position of quantitative methods in various journals, academic departments, and funding organizations. It is also a cause of these politics, because discussion of what gets included in the category is in effect discussion of what constitutes real social science.

The Perestroika movement in Political Science is a case in point – it is a forum dedicated to the reform of the American Political Science Association, but at the same time it functions as a forum for the promotion of methodological pluralism against the dominance of quantitative methods in the discipline (Monroe 2005). The issue of reform suggests that the creation of the category of qualitative methods is, in part at least, a political attempt by those who do not use quantitative methods to improve their access to the professional resources of the discipline. (I discuss the question of pluralism below.)

To the extent that it is a political attempt, one can reasonably ask whether or not it is likely to be successful. The answer is unlikely to be an unqualified yes. Committing to a disciplinary politics of quantitative/qualitative divide has the effect of reifying a dichotomy between

scholars who use mathematic symbols in their research, and scholars who do not. As an exercise in political coalition-building, this is questionable. It puts all of those perceived to have privileged access to resources in one camp, thereby presumably reinforcing their incentive to cooperate among themselves to protect this privilege. It also cedes to them the mechanism for doing so, the mantle of 'science.' In a discipline in which claims to science are based on the sorts of symbols used, those same statisticians and game theorists are in a much better position to access the resources linked to the claim to science (the Empirical Implications of Theoretical Methods project comes to mind here). Helping to create this disciplinary geography is not necessarily an effective political move by scholars who do not use those symbols.

The reification of qualitative methods as a category not only helps to cement existing in-group/out-group dynamics within the discipline, it also creates tension within the out-group. It does this by defining the boundaries of the out-group. If a method for the study of international relations is neither quantitative nor qualitative, then by implication it is not really a legitimate social science method at all. As such, any attempt to define what constitutes qualitative methods is by implication an attempt to define away the legitimacy of any method not included. Since there is no core element to 'qualitative methods' as a category, discussions of the category need to enumerate methods. Inevitably some are left out. The process of enumeration thereby becomes a political process of defining the legitimate methodological boundaries of the discipline.

This process of exclusion is sometimes undertaken self-consciously. For example, in *Designing Social Inquiry*, King, Keohane, and Verba clearly claim that inferential logic is the only logic appropriate to the empirical study of political science, implying that non-inferential approaches are illegitimate. Similarly, works that associate 'qualitative methods' with interpretation (including, to a certain extent, this book) are in effect attempts to legitimate interpretive methods. But the process of exclusion can also operate by default, even when not intended. For example, a discussion of qualitative methods as a 'toolkit' of inductive research techniques has the effect of implying that theory-driven research, such as critical theory, does not involve actual method, and is therefore not really social science. The exclusion may be unintentional, but it has disciplinary political effects nonetheless.

The answer to this politics of exclusion is a politics of pluralism. Methodological pluralism is in a way the qualitative camp's response to the quantitative camp's claim of science. Yet it is ultimately a political

claim more than a methodological claim. Underlying a call for methodological pluralism is the idea that we should all have the freedom to do our research as we see fit, rather than the claim that the research that we do is all equally valid. Many of the methodological perspectives represented in the qualitative camp, broadly defined, are not themselves pluralist. Critical theory is no more sympathetic to behaviorist research, for example, than behaviorism is to critical theory. For that matter, even within the qualitative camp, critical and inferential methods are not mutually compatible in an epistemological sense (despite Klotz's attempt to reconcile them in the case selection chapter in this book).

In other words, the politics of pluralism in qualitative method is belied by the epistemology of pluralism in qualitative method. If one believes, following Robert Cox (1981), that social theory should be critical rather than problem-solving, the political call to pluralism generated by qualitative methods as category is selling the study of politics short in exchange for disciplinary gain. The benefits of methodological pluralism become an unexamined assumption rather than a question to be asked.

If not 'Qualitative,' then what?

My argument is not in favor or against any particular method or methodology. Nor is it in any way a critique of any of the chapters in this book. Method should be done well, and the contributors provide excellent guidance. My point is about categories. We should be cautious about investing too much in 'qualitative methods' as a category, because it can be pedagogically counterproductive, and it reinforces a disciplinary political divide that its adherents should be questioning rather than reifying.

But if not qualitative methods, then what? If I argue against the category, what is it that I favor? My answer lies in categories that are both broader and narrower. The broader ones are general '-ological' categories that do not assume particular divisions. And the narrower ones survey specific sets of analytic and research tools that have core foci upon which they build, rather than reviewing disparate tools that have little in common.

Our thinking about how to think about method should begin with principles of epistemology, methodology, and research design (some-what like Part I in this book). In terms of epistemology, the major issues need to be thought about equally by scholars on both sides of the qualitative/quantitative divide. Similarly, many of the research design

issues apply across a variety of approaches and are equally applicable to research that uses qualitative or quantitative methods. Feminist scholars and quantitative scholars, for example, may use different terminology to discuss the need to make sure that information gathered is appropriate to arguments made, but there are similar research design issues either way. Thinking about and teaching these common themes helps scholars to communicate across the divide and to think about their work in a way that de-emphasizes the fetishization of technique.

Of course, some techniques do require much specific instruction. This includes statistics techniques and formal modeling, as well as interviews, participant observation, and reading documents in Chinese. And it includes critical theory. Furthermore, it includes some approaches that do not fit neatly into categories, like agent-based modeling. But there is no analytical equivalence among most of these techniques – they do not provide skills that are useful at equivalent stages of research. The narrow categories, then, should involve courses designed around specific techniques. Individual departments will not be able to provide courses in the whole array, but categorizing techniques as 'qualitative' or 'quantitative' will not change that. And losing the category of 'qualitative methods' need not eliminate comparative method, because that should be taught in the general '-ology' courses.

That the category of 'qualitative methods' makes some sense in a disciplinary sociology, as a response to a perception that 'quantitative methods' hold a privileged place, does not make it a good idea. Categorizations have implications, and the implications of this one are worth discussing before we reify it in our teaching as well as our research.