Concepts and Methods in Social Inquiry

Methodology Institute,
London School of Economics and Political Science
Reading List, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Term 2003

Teacher responsible:
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Other Teachers:
Dr Martin Bauer
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Dr Mathew Mulford

10 Sessions: Lent term 2003

Wednesdays 14.00-16.00: Clement House, Room D1.

Abstract
This course focuses on qualitative research design in the social sciences. It seeks to encourage a critical attitude towards the basic assumptions that might inform research projects in the political and social sciences. The broad aims are: to investigate the possibility that social scientific research can contribute to social progress; to heighten methodological awareness in postgraduate study; and to enable students to improve their dissertations. By the end of the course participants should have obtained a clearer understanding of some central issues that are basic to the idea of a social science. By achieving a solid grasp of important methodological debates, they should be able to employ appropriate criteria in assessing the scientific merits of scholarly literature in their area of study. Students will also be facilitated in their efforts to pursue their own research in an analytically rigorous manner.

The course is in two parts. Part 1 ‘Research Design and Evaluation’ addresses broad conceptual and methodological issues in the social science, including descriptive and casual inference in qualitative research, hypothesis testing, the logic and strategies of comparative research and rational theory evaluation. Theory will be balanced with some prominent case studies of influential political science research. Part two ‘Techniques of Analysis’ shifts from broad conceptual matters to outline a partial ‘menu’ of some of the actual research techniques that have been used to great effect in the social sciences. Topics covered include: content analysis of texts and documents; social and political surveys and questionnaires; how to design, conduct and
analyse individual and group interviews; and, rational choice theory. There is also a stand-alone session on preparing an MSc dissertation.

Assessment

There will be a two-hour unseen written exam in the summer term.

Lecture Topics and Schedule

All lectures are on Wednesdays 14.00-16.00: Clement House, Room D1.

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GENERAL READING


Paul Pennings, Hans Keman and Jan Kleinnijenhuis (1999), *Doing Research in Political Science: An Introduction to Comparative Methods and Statistics*, Sage

David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (eds) (1995), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, Macmillan. (This is a very introductory undergraduate text that is not sufficient for this course. Nevertheless, genuine neophytes might take a look).


Additional political science resources:


Mark Lichbach and Alan Zuckerman (eds) (1997), *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture and Structure*.


In the reading guide on specific topics that follows, all books listed above will be referred to by author and year.

DETAILED READING WEEK-BY-WEEK

1. **The Science in Social Science**

Paul Mitchell (Methodology Institute / Government) 15 Jan.

**Introduction**

What is *scientific* about good social science? Is there a useful distinction between quantitative and qualitative research, or between an inductive and a deductive logic of inquiry? The concepts of descriptive and explanatory inference, causality and uncertainty will be introduced. Remember, ‘the content is the method’. In other words, social science, indeed all science, depends primarily on its rules and methods, not on its ‘subject’ matter.

**Key questions**

1) ‘The only reliable method of making gains in knowledge and social progress is through scientific enquiry. Anything else is just chat.’ Discuss.

2) What are the characteristics of a good social scientific theory? Can you think of any well-known works in social science that meets these standards?

**Essential reading**

KKV (1994), ch. 1-2

**Additional reading**

KKV (1994), ch. 3. ‘Causality’ and ‘Casual Reasoning’ are difficult topics both in social scientific and philosophical accounts of established knowledge. There is no settled consensus. Ch 3 presents KKV’s counterfactual definition of causality. This is not an easy chapter but it is worth reading carefully. In general, KKV is an excellent text on scientific approaches to social inquiry. Note, however, that we do not present it as a bible or other sacred text. Many political scientists contest aspects of KKV’s book. For a sample see the next item on this reading guide.

*American Political Science Review* 89:2 (June 1995), 454-81. Five other political scientists review different parts of KKV’s book and then KKV respond.

Laver (1997) chs 1-2

Kenneth Shepsle and Mark Bonchek (1997), chs 1-2 (‘It Isn’t Rocket Science, but . . .’, and ‘Rationality: The Model of Choice’).

Jon Elster (1990), ‘When Rationality Fails’, and Geoffrey Brennan (comment on Elster above) ‘What Might Rationality Fail to Do?’, in Cook and Levi, ch. 1. Jon Elster’s chapter is a very interesting and provocative argument that ‘rational choice theory is first and foremost a normative theory and only secondarily an explanatory approach’ (p. 19).


David Sanders (1995), ‘Behavioural Analysis’ in Marsh and Stoker, ch.3


From the philosophical literature see also:

Chalmers (1999), ch. 4 (‘Deriving Theories from the Facts: Induction’)


Hollis (1994), ch. 3 (‘Positive science: the empiricist way’)

2. How to Write an MSc Dissertation

George Gaskell and Paul Mitchell 29 Jan


3. Hypothesis Testing

Matt Mulford (Methodology Institute / Management) 22 Jan.

**Bowling alone: a case study of hypothesis testing.**

**Introduction**


4. Comparative Methods 1 – the Nature of Comparison

Paul Mitchell (Methodology Institute / Government) 5 Feb.

**Introduction**

Why compare? What is meaningfully comparable? And what should not be compared? This session will examine the importance of comparison and outline the logic of comparative inquiry. A range of common errors will be observed including parochialism, misclassification, degreeism and conceptual stretching. Note that many published academics break the rules of good comparative inquiry on an almost daily basis! But that is not a recommendation!

Small-N- Large N problems and strategies for ‘solving’ them will be considered.
Think of a comparative study that you would like to design? What would you compare and how?

**Essential reading**


**Additional reading**

Dogan and Pelassy (1990), part 1 (‘The Compass of the Comparativist’) and if possible part 2.


KKV (1994), ch 6

Lichbach and Zuckerman (eds) (1997), contains several useful essays.


Tom Mackie and David Marsh (1995), ‘The Comparative Method’ in Marsh and Stoker, ch. 9

Gene D. DeFelice (1980), ‘Comparison Misconceived: Common Nonsense in Comparative Politics’, *Comparative Politics*, 13, 119-26


Charles Ragin (1987), *The Comparative Method*, University of California Press


Many interpretive (anti-naturalist) social scientists are very sceptical about the very idea of a science of comparative politics. See the relevant reading from topic 2 especially
5. Comparative Methods 2: Case Studies, Selection Bias, and the Comparison of Cases and Nations

Paul Mitchell (Methodology Institute / Government) 12 Feb

In principle anything could be compared with anything. In practice some comparisons are likely to be better than others, in the sense of producing meaningful non-obvious findings. Time permitting this session will focus on three or four aspects/problems in comparative studies:

1. Compare what? The need to segment before comparing. The choice of countries: which countries?; how many countries or cases? Most common choices: binary comparisons; comparing ‘similar’ counties; comparing ‘contrasting’ countries; asynchronic comparisions.

2. Does a Case Study really deserve to be called a ‘comparative’ method?

3. Problems of Selection Bias. Especially in qualitative (small n) research, the decision as to which cases, observations or countries to include is often crucial, indeed may even determine, the results that we get.

4. Problems of Endogeneity. This is the problem of ambiguous directions of causality. In other words, since most political research is not genuinely experimental (as in a laboratory), we usually cannot manipulate or alter our ‘independent’ (explanatory) variables. Our inability to do this leads to the problem of endogeneity, that is, that the values of our explanatory variables are sometimes a consequence, rather than the cause of, our dependent variable.

Key questions

1) ‘You can’t prove anything with a case-study.’ Examine the advantages and the disadvantages of case-study research.

2) How can we best ensure that our results are not merely an artefact of the cases that we chose?

Essential reading

1) Peters (1998), chs 3-4; 6-7


Additional readings

Many of the readings for the previous comparative methods session remain relevant. In addition see:

KKV (1994), chs 4-5.

Dogan and Pelassy (1990), parts 3-4

Peters (1998), chs 5, 8-10.


See also the symposium entitled:

6. **Problems of Rational Theory Evaluation: Example -The Case of Lijphart and Consociational Theory in Comparative Politics.**

Paul Mitchell (Methodology Institute / Government) 19 Feb.

**Introduction**

How _do_ we evaluate the theoretical and empirical ‘success’ of any major theory in the social world? How _should_ we do so? We will consider these questions by examining one leading theory in social science: consociationalism as a tool for regulating serious ethno-national conflicts.

Consociationalism has undoubtedly been one of the more influential research programmes in the last 30 years of political research. While several others helped develop consociational theory, Lijphart has clearly been its most notable proponent and champion. For the sake of clarity we will therefore focus on Lijphart’s version(s) of consociational theory. *Please note,* however, that while some knowledge of the content of the theory is necessary, the focus of this session will be on the trajectory of the research programme rather than the detailed substance of the theory. In other words, we want to ask why has the theory been so ‘successful’ and ‘influential’? Of course this leads directly to the question of what constitutes the success of a research programme? Imre Lakatos’s methodological propositions may aid us in this task.

**Key questions**

1) ‘Consociationalism: a logic of accommodation so indispensable in divided societies that it is continually re-invented by politicians, whatever its theoretical shortcomings.’ Discuss.

2) ‘Consociationalism is essentially a “falsified” theory.’ Is this the case? If so, is it the efforts of consociational theorists that best explain its continuing influence?

**Essential reading**


**Lakatos and the Idea of a Research Programme**

Consider Popper’s and in this context especially Lakatos’s ideas on the falsification of research programmes. If you are brave you could tackle the difficult primary text from Lakatos (see below).

However, the key primary source for Lakatos’s philosophy of science is extremely difficult:

For most of us it will be easier to get to grips with Lakatos’ central ideas by reading this good and accessible book:

See also, Chalmers (1999), chs 5-7 and especially 9

**Additional readings on consociational theory**


Eric Nordlinger (1972), *Conflict Regulation in Divided Societies*, Occasional Papers in International Affairs, Harvard University.

Jurg Steiner (1981), ‘Review Article: The Consociational Theory and Beyond’, *Comparative Politics*, 13, 339-54 (see also Lijphart’s reply to Steiner in same issue, 355-60).

Arend Lijphart (1968), ‘Typologies of Democratic Systems’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 3-44.


**Application to Northern Ireland**


7. Content Analysis of Documents

Martin W Bauer (Methodology Institute / Social Psychology) 26 Feb.

Introduction
Content analysis constructs indicators of public opinion from published materials. As a method it is a hybrid, bridging the two worlds of qualitative and quantitative research. There is no quantification without qualification. The lecture will cover a short history of content analysis; sampling methods; choice of units of analysis; construction of a coding frame; reliable coding processes, computerised content analysis, and some examples.

Essential reading


Additional readings


8. Quantitative Analysis: the Social Survey

George Gaskell (Methodology Institute / Social Psychology) 5 March.

Introduction
The social survey/questionnaire is probably one of the most widely used data collection instruments in social research. In an increasingly data dependent society, surveys are used in a variety of contexts to provide indicators of, for example, political participation, social capital and citizenship, political attitudes, expenditure patterns, transport use, public understanding of science, and in academic research to develop and test theory. This session outlines the key issues in the design of questionnaires and surveys.

Reading


Schwarz, N. (1994), ‘Judgment in a social context: Biases, shortcomings and the logic of
9. Qualitative Analysis: Conducting Interviews

George Gaskell (Methodology Institute / Social Psychology) 12 March

Introduction
The objective of qualitative research is a fine grained understanding, a ‘thick description’ of the beliefs, attitudes and values, and the motivations and behaviours of people in particular social contexts. It aims to understand how people construct and understand their social world, their paramount reality. This session outlines approaches to qualitative inquiry, with an emphasis on how to design, conduct and analyse individual and group interviews.

Reading


10. Rational Choice Theory

Paul Mitchell (Methodology Institute / Government) 19 March.

Introduction

Rational choice theory has clearly been one of the key methodological developments in the last 40 years of political science. Premised on methodological individualism, it borrows from economic reasoning and attempts to construct parsimonious models of political behaviour that generate non-obvious insights. It aims to move the study of politics from the descriptive and judgmental to the analytic and explanatory. Important Note: there is often initial confusion about the meaning of the word ‘rational’ in this context. It is important to realise that rational choice theorists are using the word in a technical rather than its popular every-day sense. It has nothing to do with value judgements concerning whether one’s goals are good, bad or downright evil. It is possible to pursue ‘evil’ goals in a rational manner. Rational choice theory treats preferences as ‘primitive’, or exogenous to the model. The aim is to analyse goal-seeking, or ‘instrumentally rational’, behaviour and to highlight and hopefully resolve collective action and coordination problems. Among the things we want to discover are the conditions under which cooperation can flourish. In contrast to an empirical (or inductive) research design, rational choice theory is essentially deductive. In other words it logically deduces findings from an a priori set of assumptions. This has implications for theory evaluation since a rational choice theory cannot solely be judged by its empirical or predictive success.

Key questions

1) William Riker (one of the founding fathers of rational choice theory) attempts to account for the great disparity between, on the one hand, the rapid development of the ‘natural’ sciences, and, on the other hand, the rather slow progress of the social sciences. His answer is that the social sciences generally, microeconomics excepted, have not been based on rational choice models. His contention is that if they had been, progress would have been much more rapid. Do you agree?

2) Evaluate the methods employed by rational choice theorists. What is a rational choice approach?

Essential reading

1). Laver (1997), chs 1-2

3) Shepsle and Bonchek (1997), ch. 10 (‘Public Goods, Externalities, and the Commons’)


Additional readings
Shepsle and Bonchek (1997), ch. 8 (‘Cooperation’) and ch. 9 (‘Collective Action’).

Laver (1997), chs 3 and 8


Nozick (1993), ch. 5.

Donald Green and Ian Shapiro (1994), Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science, Yale UP.


Michael Laver (1997), Playing Politics: The Nightmare Continues, Oxford UP.


Peter Ordeshook (1992), A Political Theory Primer, Routledge.

Robert Gibbons (1992), A Primer in Game Theory, Prentice Hall/ Princeton UP.

You will find that rational choice theory is discussed in a number of the textbooks on the philosophy of social science. See for example

Hollis (1994), ch. 6
Bohman (1991), ch. 2 especially pp. 67-76, ch. 5, especially pp. 197-204,