Straws-in-the-wind, Hoops and Smoking Guns: What can Process Tracing Offer to Impact Evaluation?

Description

Tweet

[Spotted via tweet by Chris Roche]
Punton, M., Welle, K., 2015. *Straws-in-the-wind, Hoops and Smoking Guns: What can Process Tracing Offer to Impact Evaluation?* Available as pdf

See also the Annex *Applying Process Tracing in Five Steps*, also available as pdf

Abstract: â??This CDI Practice Paper by Melanie Punton and Katharina Welle explains the methodological and theoretical foundations of process tracing, and discusses its potential application in international development impact evaluations. It draws on two early applications of process tracing for assessing impact in international development interventions: Oxfam Great Britain (GB)â??s contribution to advancing universal health care in Ghana, and the impact of the Hunger and Nutrition Commitment Index (HANCI) on policy change in Tanzania. In a companion to this paper, Practice Paper 10 Annex describes the main steps in applying process tracing and provides some examples of how these steps might be applied in practice.â?•

Annex abstract: Abstract This Practice Paper Annex describes the main steps in applying process tracing, as adapted from Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines (Beach and Pedersen 2013). It
also provides some examples of how these steps might be applied in practice, drawing on a case study discussed in CDI Practice Paper 10.

Rick Davies Comment: This is one of a number of recent publications now available on process tracing (See bibliography below)). The good thing about this IDS publication is its practical orientation, on how to do process tracing. However, I think there are three gaps which concern me:

- Not highlighting how process tracing (based on within-case investigations) can be complimentary to cross-case investigations (which can be done using the Configurational or Regularity approaches in Box 1 of this paper). While within-case investigations can elaborate on the how-things-work question, across-case questions can tell us about the scale on which these things are happening (i.e. their coverage). The former is about mechanisms, the latter is about associations. A good causal claim will involve both association(s) and mechanism(s).
- Not highlighting out the close connection between conceptions of necessary and sufficient causes and the four types of tests the paper describes. The concepts of necessary and/or sufficient causes provide a means of connecting both levels of analyses, they can be used to describe what is happening at both levels (causal conditions and configurations in cross-cases investigations and mechanisms in within-case investigations).
- Not highlighting out that there are two important elements to the tests, not just one (probability). One is the ability to disprove a proposition of sufficiency or necessity through the existence of a single contrary case, the other is the significance of the prior probability of an event happening.

See more belowâ?¦

The Better Evaluation website describes the relationship between the tests and the types of causes as follows (with some extra annotations here by myself)

- â??Hoopâ?? test is failed when examination of a case shows the presence of a Necessary causal condition but the outcome of interest is not present.
    - Passing a common hoop condition is more persuasive than an uncommon one [This is the Bayesian bit referred to in the IDS paper â?? the significance of an event is affected by our prior assumptions about its occurrence]
- â??Smoking Gunâ?? test is passed when examination of a case shows the presence of a Sufficient causal condition.
    - Passing an uncommon smoking gun condition is more persuasive than a common one [The Bayesian bit again]
- â??Doubly Definitiveâ?? test is passed when examination of a case shows that a condition is both Necessary and Sufficient support for the explanation. These tend to be rare.

Instead, the authors (possibly following other cited authors) make use of two related distinctions, between certainty and uniqueness, in place of necessity and sufficiency. I am not sure that this helps much. Certainty arises from something being a necessity, not the other way around

Postscript: I have set up a Zotero based online bibliography on process tracing here, which displays all the papers I have come across in recent years, which may be of interest to readers of MandE NEWS

Category

1. Uncategorized

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