Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool

Description

Tweet

Bennett, A., Checkel, J. (Eds.), 2014. Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool.
Cambridge University Press

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â??This book argues that techniques falling under the label of process tracing are particularly well suited for measuring and testing hypothesized causal mechanisms. Indeed, a growing number of political scientists now invoke the term. Despite or perhaps because of this fact, a buzzword problem has arisen, where process tracing is mentioned, but often with little thought or explication of how it works in practice. As one sharp observer has noted, proponents of qualitative methods draw upon various debates â?? over mechanisms and causation, say â?? to argue that process tracing is necessary and good. Yet, they have done much less work to articulate the criteria for determining whether a particular piece of research counts as good process tracing (Waldner 2012: 65â??68). Put differently, â??there is substantial distance between the broad claim that â??process tracing is goodâ?? and the precise claim â??this is an instance of good process tracingâ??â?• (Waldner 2011: 7).

This volume addresses such concerns, and does so along several dimensions. Meta-theoretically, it establishes a philosophical basis for process tracing â?? one that captures mainstream uses while simultaneously being open to applications by interpretive scholars. Conceptually, contributors explore the relation of process tracing to mechanism-based understandings of causation. Most importantly, we articulate best practices for individual process-tracing accounts â?? for example, criteria for how micro to go and how to deal with the problem of equifinality (the possibility that there may be multiple pathways leading to the same outcome).

Ours is an applied methods book â?? and not a standard methodology text â?? where the aim is to show how process tracing works in practice. If Van Evera (1997), George and Bennett (2005), Gerring (2007a), and Rohlfing (2012) set the state of the art for case studies, then our volume is a logical follow-on, providing clear guidance for what is perhaps the central within-case method â?? process tracing.

Despite all the recent attention, process tracing â?? or the use of evidence from within a case to make inferences about causal explanations of that case â?? has in fact been around for thousands of years. Related forms of analysis date back to the Greek historian Thucydides and perhaps even to the origins of human language and society. It is nearly impossible to avoid historical explanations and causal inferences from historical cases in any purposive human discourse or activity.

Although social science methodologists have debated and elaborated on formal approaches to inference such as statistical analysis for over a hundred years, they have only recently coined the term â??process tracingâ?• or attempted to explicate its procedures in a systematic way. Perhaps this is because drawing causal inferences from historical cases is a more intuitive practice than statistical analysis and one that individuals carry out in their everyday lives. Yet, the seemingly intuitive nature of process tracing obscures that its unsystematic use is fraught with potential inferential errors; it is thus

important to utilize rigorous methodological safeguards to reduce such risks.

The goal of this book is therefore to explain the philosophical foundations, specific techniques, common evidentiary sources, and best practices of process tracing to reduce the risks of making inferential errors in the analysis of historical and contemporary cases. This introductory chapter first defines process tracing and discusses its foundations in the philosophy of social science. We then address its techniques and evidentiary sources, and advance ten bestpractice criteria for judging the quality of process tracing in empirical research. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the methodological issues specific to process tracing on general categories of theories, including structuralinstitutional, cognitive-psychological, and sociological. Subsequent chapters take up this last issue in greater detail and assess the contributions of process tracing in particular research programs or bodies of theoryâ•

Preface
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Appendix. Disciplining our conjectures: systematizing process tracing with Bayesian analysis.

See also: Bennett, A., 2008. Process Tracing: A Bayesian Perspective. The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology Chapter 30. Pages 702â??721. (a pdf)

Category

1. Uncategorized

Date
11/10/2026
Date Created
24/03/2015
Author
admin