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Causal-Process Tracing

In most small-N studies, the tracing of causal processes plays an important role. Very often, causal-process tracing (CPT) is used as a complementary technique to co-variational analysis (COV). Tracing the process that leads from a causal factor to an outcome makes it possible to enhance the internal validity of a causal claim that ‘x matters’ (Gerring 2007a: 173–84). This ‘added value’ is especially warranted when the compared cases are not as similar as they should be (to be ‘controlled’), when the co-variational analysis is indeterminate (because more than one independent variable co-varies with the dependent variable in a theoretically meaningful way), or when the measurement and classification of variables is not as clear-cut as it should be. We will provide examples for the combination of COV and CPT in Section 5.2, wherein we address overlaps and combinations of the three approaches to case study research.

However, in this chapter, we delineate the main features of causal-process tracing as a distinct approach to case study research. It will become clear that the CPT approach has affinities to specific research questions. Those questions, in turn, imply different ways to select cases in comparison with the COV approach, and they pursue different aims to draw conclusions beyond the investigated cases. Furthermore, the CPT approach begins with ontological assumptions different from those of the COV approach, the epistemological basis for drawing causal inferences is very different, and the CPT approach has its own terminology. Identifying CPT merely as an addendum to COV seriously underestimates the potential of this approach and, probably even more importantly, misrepresents the major goals and fundaments of this approach. Recognizing the distinct features of CPT does not inhibit the combination of causal-process tracing techniques with other techniques.
and approaches to causal analysis, but it makes us more aware that there are trade-offs and problems involved (which we also address in Section 5.2).

The first step to describing the distinct goal of the CPT approach is to argue that it is much less X-centered compared to the COV approach. In a first approximation, it can be argued that the CPT approach is Y-centered, which means that the researcher is interested in the many and complex causes of a specific outcome (Y) and not so much in the effects of a specific cause (X). ‘How come?’ and/or ‘How was this (Y) possible?’ are the pro-typical questions of this explanatory approach, not ‘Does it (X) matter?’ or ‘Does it (X) make a difference?’ Nevertheless, in contrast to historians, for social scientists, most often the research goal is not to explain only a single important social event (Gerring 2007a: 187–210 calls this a single-outcome study). Instead, social scientists also want to identify and explain more general and/or more abstract aspects of the social world, without losing sight of the diversity in outcomes and preconditions. As a consequence, they apply CPT to the search for necessary and sufficient conditions that lead to a specific type of outcome, or they use CPT to more closely understand the theory-based ‘mechanisms’ that actually link causal factors to outcomes. The pro-typical questions for these tasks are: ‘Which (combination of) conditions make this kind of outcome possible?’ and ‘Which underlying mechanisms effectively make the cause creating the outcome?’

What unites all of these goals and pro-typical questions is the fact that the search for solutions and answers is based on ‘configurational thinking’ (Ragin 2008: 109–46). In contrast to the COV approach, which focuses on the effects of individual causes (independent variables), approaches based on configurational thinking begin with the following assumptions:

- almost all social outcomes are the results of a combination of causal factors;
- there are divergent pathways to similar social outcomes (equifinality); and
- the effects of the same causal factor can be different in different contexts and combinations (causal heterogeneity).

Configurational thinking dramatically impacts the way scholars perform comparative analysis. The set-theoretic logics and techniques that Charles Ragin and his followers developed to draw systematic causal inferences from the study of a medium number of cases (crisp set