

# **Workshop - 'Process Tracing – philosophy, theory and practice'**

**ECPR Joint Workshops 2012, Antwerp**

## Co-directors

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the workshop is to contribute to the expanding methodological literature on qualitative case study methods. Our focus is on process tracing and in-depth case study methods more generally, as well as the role that they can play in multi-method research designs. Witnessing an increasing use of process tracing in empirical research and an increasing body of methodological literature on process tracing and causal mechanisms, we see the need to draw the literature together. At the same time, we need to develop further our knowledge on key aspects of process tracing such as how Bayesian updating can be used as an inferential logic, and when and how process tracing studies can be nested in multi-method research designs.

We invite papers that explore the ontological and epistemological foundations of process tracing. Extending the perspective beyond designs that exclusively rely on process tracing, we expect that some papers will deal with the combination of process tracing with other methods in multi-methods designs. Finally, we want to attract empirical case studies that demonstrate process tracing in action and that shed new light on how the promise of this technique can be brought to fruition in the analysis of social phenomena.

## **Themes of the workshop**

Process tracing is a distinct method in comparison to other research methods such as regression analysis and Qualitative Comparative Analysis. Process tracing involves research where, “the cause-effect link that connects independent variable and outcome is unwrapped and divided into smaller steps; then the investigator looks for observable evidence of each step.” (Van Evera 1997:64). Gerring even suggests that ‘if well constructed’, they “...may allow one to peer into the box of causality to locate the intermediate factors lying between some structural cause and its purported effect” (2007:45).

These promises of process tracing as a methodological tool are tied to the opportunity to study *causal mechanisms* in qualitative within-case analyses and to shed light on how an outcome comes about. Process tracing is arguably the only method that allows us to study causal

mechanisms and answer “how questions”, therefore representing ‘...invaluable method that should be included in every researcher’s repertoire.’ (George and Bennett 2005:224).

Despite the widespread use of process tracing in empirical research and an increasing body of methodological literature on process tracing and causal mechanisms, we see a number of issues that warrant intensive discussion at a workshop at the ECPR Joint Sessions.

First, we claim that it is necessary to consolidate the current debate and to draw together the various contributions that have been published recently. This point concerns the methodological claims attached to process tracing as much as the ontological and epistemological discussion of the foundations of process tracing methodology.

Second, notwithstanding the growing body of literature, there is only little progress in some directions. For example, Brady, Collier and Seawright emphasize that selected statistical tools like Bayes’ theorem and Bayesian updating can be fruitfully applied in process tracing (Brady, Collier and Seawright, 2006). Since then, however, all treatments of this issue were informal and contributed in our eyes relatively little to what is known since the late 1990s. Our workshop aims to give methodologically interested researchers the opportunity to discuss and evaluate new ideas to add to the field of qualitative methods.

Third, process tracing is now increasingly often a constitutive element of multi-method research, that is, designs that combine large-n methods and qualitative within-case analyses. Researchers who are engaged in multi-method analysis and combine two methods in an innovative way have the opportunity to present their work at our workshop. Similarly, we aim to discuss a number of issues that should be regarded in combining two methods but that have received scant attention so far. For instance, it is frequently argued that concepts and measures are thin and weak in quantitative research, whereas case study researchers pay close attention to conceptual soundness and valid measures. The ways in which small-n research can contribute to concept formation and measurement in multi-method designs is relatively unexplored ground, though.

## **Types of papers that will be encouraged**

We envision that the selected papers will include papers that explore the ontological and epistemological foundations of process tracing and the qualitative analysis of causal mechanisms. Extending the perspective beyond designs that exclusively rely on process tracing, we expect that some papers will deal with the combination of process tracing with other methods in multi-methods designs. Finally, we want to attract empirical case studies that demonstrate process tracing in action and that shed new light on how the promise of this technique can be brought to fruition in the analysis of social and political phenomena.

We especially encourage papers on three different themes:

### *1) Challenges relating to the conceptualization and operationalization of causal mechanisms*

- What are causal mechanisms and how are they related to causal effects?
- How can they be conceptualized and operationalized in a manner that permits them to be studied in practice?
- What are the implications for process tracing that follow from specific definitions of causal mechanisms?

### *2) Practice and methodological challenges of process tracing*

- Practical and methodological investigations of the evidential weight of different types of sources, comparing primary sources (archives) with forms of secondary sources (newspaper accounts, participant interviews) for their evidential weight.
- How can we assess empirical material using case-specific knowledge in a transparent manner that enables replication?
- What measures for the uncertainty of causal inferences are available in process tracing?
- What methodological implications does the Bayesian logic of inference have for process tracing?

### *3) Using process tracing in combination with other methods in multi-method research*

- What is the epistemological common ground for the combination of large-n methods aiming for causal effects and process tracing searching for causal mechanisms?
- How can process tracing be used for the improvement of concepts, indicators, and the quality of measures in multi-method designs?
- Reaching beyond regression analysis, how can process tracing be combined with other techniques like social network analysis, Bayesian modeling, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), or cluster analysis?
- What are appropriate case selection strategies for process tracing in multi-method designs?

### **Participants**

We encourage a broad range of participants, ranging from scholars working on developing methods to established scholars and Ph.D. candidates that are using process tracing methods as a part of their substantive research.

## **Biographical note**

Derek Beach is an Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. He is currently writing a book on Process Tracing methodology. His substantive research deals with negotiations in the EU, in particular on the impact of bureaucratic actors.

### Selected publications

Beach, Derek and Rasmus Brun Pedersen (under review) *Process-tracing methods*. Under contract at the University of Michigan Press.

Beach, Derek and Rasmus Brun Pedersen (2010) 'Observing causal mechanisms with Process Tracing methods.', Paper presented at the 2010 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.

Beach, Derek (2005) *The Dynamics of European Integration*. Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan.

Ingo Rohlfing is Assistant Professor in Comparative Social Research at the Cologne Graduate School (CGS) in Management, Economics and Social Sciences at the University of Cologne. He is currently finishing a book on the case study method. His substantive research is on party politics and international trade cooperation.

### Selected publications

Rohlfing, Ingo (2012): *Methodologies of Case Studies*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Rohlfing, Ingo (2009): Discrimination in International Trade: A Different Perspective. *Acta Politica* 44 (2): 192-210.

Rohlfing, Ingo (2008): What You See and What You Get: Pitfalls and Principles of Nested Analysis in Comparative Research. *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (11): 1492-1514.

## References

Brady, Henry E., David Collier & Jason Seawright (2006) 'Towards a Pluralistic Vision of Methodology.', *Political Analysis* (2006) Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 353-368.

George, Alexander L. & Bennett, Andrew (2005) *Case studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press.

Gerring, John (2007) *Case Study Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly (2008) 'Methods for Measuring Mechanisms of Contention.', *Qualitative Sociology*, 31(4): 307-331.

Van Evera, Stephen (1997) *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.