

RSS01.C4-C5 Process Tracing Methods (Two week course)

Week 1

Day 1

Positions PT in the broader methodological field. We define PT by the interest in studying causal mechanisms in single case studies and explore how PT relates to, but differs from and advances, other case study methods. We explore different understandings of PT and mechanisms and discuss the different processual claims that are and can be made together with their respective strengths and weaknesses.

Day 2

Addresses causal mechanisms in more detail. We take a deeper look into process theorization, discussing the different types of conceptual vocabularies that process tracers have used and their strengths and weaknesses. Singling out one such account more specifically, we focus on mechanisms understood as a series of entities engaging in activities that link causes and outcomes together, and how they can be theorized in practice.

Day 3

Is dedicated to evidence of causal processes. (How) can we confirm/disconfirm the existence of a causal mechanism, and what kind of evidence can we use? How can we evaluate the probative value of the evidence? Building loosely on Bayesian logic, we explore how theoretical propositions about causal processes can be translated into propositions about evidence (observables). The session ends with an exercise based on a Sherlock Holmes story.

Day 4

Unpacks a published example of process tracing (Winward, 2021). We assess the type of theoretical and causal claims being made and the evidence used in the article. Based on this, we discuss different standards for what constitutes 'good' PT.

Day 5

Is committed to working with your own mechanisms and projects. The goal of the sessions is to develop the causal linkages in your own cases, as well as finding an appropriate level of theoretical abstraction.

Week 2

Day 1

Returns to the issue of process theorization, focusing on how the causal linkages in processes can be made clearer in your theorization. The session explores the theoretical language used by different approaches, including the processual account (causal principles) and critical realism (causal mechanisms).

Day 2

Unpacks another published example of process tracing (Löblová, 2018), exploring in more practical terms how the causal linkages in the process theorization could be further elucidated, and how this could link to empirics that enable stronger causal inferences to be made.

Day 3

Explores in more depth how we can evaluate evidence in PT methods. We focus in particular on the challenges of updating theories using an abductive, back-and-forth dialogue between our process theories and the empirical world, and common challenges related to source bias and how we can minimize (but never eliminate) them in practical PT field work.

Day 4

Discusses different case selection strategies in PT, focusing on the use of typical (positive) cases and deviant (consistency) cases and their uses. The session also introduces the debate about 'generalization' and causal processes, exploring different positions on whether claims can be made beyond very bounded contexts, and if so, what types of generalization strategies exist and how they can be used in practice.

Day 5

Explores how PT can be used in conjunction with other methods, focusing in particular on the use of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) as a supplementary tool for case selection, determining the bounds of generalizations, and theory-building as regards causes/outcomes.