

Conference on «Qualitative Comparative Analysis:  
Social Science Applications and Methodological Challenges»

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# Nice results – But are they valid?

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# Why should we bother?

- We cannot believe findings about *causality* unless proven “valid”
- Validity yardsticks discipline the research process
- The wrong yardstick can spoil the analysis

→ How common/separate yardsticks should be?

- nomothetic validity
- idiographic validity

# Dimensions of nomothetic validity

- **Internal/Statistical**
  - > no alternative causes to that effect
    - Insulation by design (randomized assignment to treatment, independence tests)
- **External**
  - > the relationship holds under different gauges and contexts
    - Cumulation by replication and reproduction, meta-analysis
- **Construct**
  - > conceptual labels and measures are precise and overlapping
    - Measures of same constructs correlate, measures of different constructs do not

# Dimensions of idiographic validity

- **Internal/logical**
  - > compelling evidence, airtight argument
    - Rival explanatory hypotheses of key cases
- **External**
  - > clear domain of applicability of theories
    - detailed account of the case for evaluating similarities
- **Construct**
  - > measures are proper and consistent gauges
    - triangulation, members' checks
- **Reliability**
  - > different researcher should get to the same result
    - transparency, protocols, databases

# Common concerns

- Biases, ambiguities from
  - Gauges
  - Technique of induction
  - Design

# Different strategies

## NOMOTHETIC

*value* certainty

*goal* proving an if-then relationship

*question* effect of a cause  
> the causal power of a  
single property  
across contexts

*causation* covariation – mediators,  
moderators  
> billiard balls

*falsification* Not excluding all the alternative  
causes to the same effect  
[insulation/independence +  
counterfactual evidence]

## IDIOPHGRAPHIC

usability

applying the proper understanding

causes of an effect  
> conjoint situated generation  
of an effect  
even in a single case

interaction with contexts, from  
micro to macro  
> observable mechanism

Not excluding some key alternative  
interpretations  
[conditional/counterfactual  
adjudication]

# ...and QCA?

## NOMOTHEMIC

## IDIOPHGRAPHIC

**value** certainty

usability

**goal**

proving an if-then

explaining differences  
in the occurrence of  
an outcome

the proper understanding

**question**

effect of a cause

of an effect

> the causal power of a  
single property  
across context

> conjoint situated generation  
of an effect  
in a single case

**causation**

covariation –  
moderators  
> billiard balls

chemical **unobservable**  
mechanism enabled,  
triggered and hindered  
by special properties

with contexts, from  
macro  
observable mechanism

**falsification**

Not excluding all the alternative  
causes to the same effect  
insulation/induction  
counterfactual evaluation

contradictory  
configurations,  
[minimizations to  
irrelevance]

Not excluding some key alternative  
causes by  
(/counterfactual)  
evaluation

# Findings are valid when QCA avoids...

- **Gauges**
  - **Classification error** > *threshold setting* > external meaningful settings, recalibration
- **Induction**
  - **Ambiguous configurations** > *low S-cons* > exclusion from minimizations (>coverage outliers)
  - **Contradictory simplifying assumptions** > *closed analytical space* > theoretical, ontological, empirical adjudication



# Findings are valid when QCA avoids...

- **Design**

- **«Non-causal» conditions** > *hp. about the actual unfolding of non-observable mechanism(s)* > operationalizing triggering, enabling, hindering conditions proximate to the outcome *within a meaningful population*
- **«Model» underspecification** > *consistency/coverage outliers* > add explanatory condition(s) related to the mechanism
- **«Model» overspecification** > *serious limited diversity* > stepwise construction of the *operational* model based on the capacity of conditions of addressing contradictions

# In a nutshell

- QCA has its own validity threats, consistent with its understanding of causality and its technique
- What QCA can better do is to prove and detail some ex post mechanistic explanation of actual successes and failures in a population – which hold at the case level
- Borrowing from other causal ontologies and mimicking other strategies can hinder the heuristics of QCA

thank you

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