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# Causal Thinking and Ethnographic Research

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In the history of modern sociology, no generation has failed to worry about how to conceptualize cause and effect. While different eras have adopted different languages, both theorists and methodologists have repeatedly argued about what can be said and how it should be said, often replaying debates of past eras. Nevertheless, the past two decades have seen a preponderance of activity that, while speaking to long-standing issues, can be said to have substantially refined our thinking about the relationship between cause and effect. At least three separate perspectives—each with a particular orientation, core assumptions, and understanding of objectives—have become particularly salient.

One perspective is the counterfactual model of causality, which is typically employed by quantitative sociologists in the analysis of large-sample, observational data. Developed by statisticians and econometricians to understand when a cause can be said convincingly to have produced an effect, the counterfactual, or potential outcomes, model conceives of causes as treatments; it seeks to compare what happens to an individual (or organization, group, or other entity) experiencing the treatment to what would have happened had the person not experienced the treatment. Since no one can both experience and not experience a treatment at the same time, the purpose of analysis is to estimate treatment effects on average for populations (see Rubin 1974; Heckman 2005; Pearl 2009). A recent review of the methodological literature on this topic by Morgan and Winship (2007) has become a handbook for many quantitative sociologists worried about making proper causal inferences.

A core assumption of the counterfactual perspective is that sociologists should focus on understanding the effects of a given cause (e.g., what are the effects of recessions?) rather than the causes of a given effect (e.g., what causes revolutions to occur?), since questions of the latter sort are difficult to answer convincingly. Gelman (2011) recently referred to this distinction

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as that between forward causal inference (what is the effect of  $X$ ?) and reverse causal inference (what caused  $Y$ ?). While Gelman considers the former type of question difficult but tractable, he finds the latter fraught with insurmountable conceptual challenges.

These challenges are precisely the focus of a second perspective, the qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) model of causality, which is often employed by historical sociologists in the analysis of small-sample data (Ragin 1987). This perspective originated among comparativists in sociology and political science concerned with understanding the roots of major sociopolitical changes among small numbers of nations. In such contexts, the number of possible factors (causes) producing a given outcome (effect) is at times much larger than the number of nations (cases) at hand, such that conventional statistical analyses are likely to frustrate the researcher. Furthermore, in these contexts the most substantively important questions are often reverse causal questions: What causes revolutions to occur? What causes nations to develop strong welfare policies? What causes populations to protest the IMF?

Researchers adopting a QCA perspective believe that a given outcome results not only from multiple causes but also, specifically, from a particular combination of them. The perspective uses principles developed from basic Boolean algebra to identify the combination of conditions necessary or sufficient for an outcome to occur (Ragin 1987). It assumes that a properly executed analysis will identify the full combination of factors required for a given outcome. The perspective has grown rapidly in recent years, introducing the use of fuzzy sets and probabilistic models that relax some of the more deterministic assumptions of the earlier formulation (e.g., Bail 2008; Ragin 2000, 2008).

A third perspective is not strictly focused on either the effects of causes or the causes of effects but on the mechanisms linking cause and effect. This perspective probably rose to prominence in sociology among those concerned about the two-way connections between macrolevel conditions and microlevel behavior (Coleman 1990; Hedström and Swedberg 1998). Whereas the other two perspectives are concerned with “whether-or-not” questions (i.e., whether a given cause has an effect and whether a given effect resulted from a particular combination of causes), the mechanism perspective is concerned with “how” questions. As Hedström and Ylikoski (2010, p. 50) noted in a recent review, the perspective seeks to unearth “the cogs and wheels of the causal process through which the outcome to be explained was brought about.”

The mechanism perspective sees the core of causal explanation not in the irrefutable proof that changes in one variable tend to cause changes in another but in the clear understanding of what process might produce

such changes. The perspective has encouraged researchers to pay particular attention to how individuals respond to social conditions, to how these responses interact with those of others, and to how both individual and collective responses produces larger-scale phenomena. If the counterfactual perspective is prominent among sociologists using large-sample observational data and the QCA perspective is prominent among historical sociologists, the mechanism perspective is probably most prominent among analytical sociologists (Hedström and Bearman 2009).

While the work in these and other perspectives on causality has grown rapidly in recent years, the role of contemporary ethnographic research in any of this work remains unclear. While the old debates between quantitative and qualitative researchers about the superiority of the alternative methods has subsided—and, in fact, quantitative researchers concerned with causal questions today often point to ethnographies to interpret their findings (see Small 2011)—few scholars in the aforementioned traditions have asked what role ethnographic data might play in causal analysis. In addition, few ethnographers have addressed these contemporary causal perspectives in any depth.

In 2012, a conference was held at the University of Chicago devoted to understanding the role of ethnographic research in contemporary causal thinking. The conference was based on an open call for papers; a small fraction of submissions, about a dozen in all, was selected for presentation. The conference addressed a number of questions: Is counterfactual thinking useful to ethnographers? Does ethnographic research help identify its flaws? Are the deductive methods of set-theoretic models appropriate when research is driven by induction and abduction? What approaches to inference in ethnographic research would constitute a better alternative? There were many others. Following the conference, a call for papers was publicized by the *American Journal of Sociology* for researchers addressing these questions. Researchers needed not be part of the conference to submit papers. Submitted papers were peer reviewed per the standard *AJS* process, and evaluated by a dedicated editorial board composed of Neil Gross, David Harding, Monica McDermott, and Kristen Schilt. I served as special editor. Three of these papers were selected for publication.

In “Styles of Causal Thought: An Empirical Investigation,” Gabriel Abend, Caitlin Petre, and Michael Sauder examine the extent to which ethnographers in sociology have actually made causal claims in their works and, when they have, how they have done so. The authors analyze both contemporary and midcentury ethnographic studies in U.S. journals and compare these to studies over the same periods in Mexican journals. The authors find notable differences between U.S. and Mexican sociologists, and between those publishing in generalist versus specialist journals, in not only

the degree of emphasis on causality but also in the extent to which language adopted from quantitative methods is part of the author's rhetorical and logical strategy.

In "How Options Disappear: Causality and Emergence in Grassroots Activist Groups," Kathleen Blee seeks to understand how budding activist groups decide which tactics to adopt to meet their objectives. Her perspective is centrally focused on mechanisms, with an aim to trace the emergence of social phenomena from within group interactions. Studying four activist groups in their early stages, she finds, among other things, that of the wide range of tactics that groups could in theory adopt, the much smaller set from which they will actually develop their own are, in fact, set by the time the groups form. Emergence actually arises from within rather circumscribed limits. At the same time, however, because tactics evolve over interpersonal interactions, unpredictable and rare events can produce major shifts in the sense of plausible tactics.

In "A Pragmatist Approach to Causality in Ethnography" Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans make a case for what a mechanism-based perspective on causality in ethnography must do to be convincing. Relying on the semiotic approach of Charles Peirce, they argue that ethnographers should focus on meaning-making in action; distinguish important from unimportant process by examining variation across data sets, across time, and across situations; and use these analyses to eliminate alternative explanations about how meaning making affects action. The authors illustrate their argument by unpacking interactions between families and doctors after the introduction of a policy to screen newborns for potential diseases.

While these studies by no means exhaust the range of approaches that ethnographers seem to be taking to address causal questions, they certainly make clear the fruitfulness of addressing these questions actively. Causal questions will remain with us for some time to come. We hope this collection of studies stimulates new thinking about such questions in the context of ethnography.

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